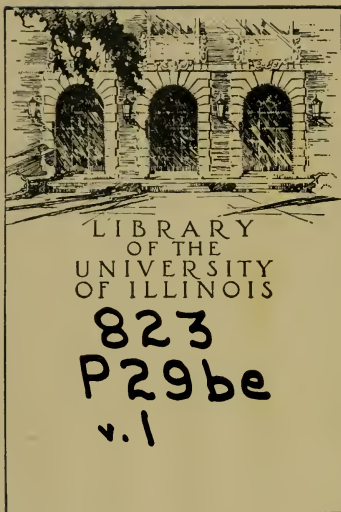




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THE BEST OF HUSBANDS.

BY

JAMES PAYN,

AUTHOR OF 'LOST SIR MASSINGBERD,' A PERFECT TREASURE,
'AT HER MERCY,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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THE BEST OF HUSBANDS.



CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

‘WAS Milbank at the manufactory this morning, Maggie?’

‘Do you mean John or Richard, father?’

Old Mr. Thorne looked up from his occupation, which was that of engraving something very neat and delicate on a steel plate, and regarded his daughter with a look that was at once tender and grave. Constant intentness on very minute work had deepened the furrows which age had made on his bald fore-

head, but he was not, in reality, very far advanced in life. As he removes the magnifying-glass, which, while engaged in his calling, is habitually fixed in his eye, you can see how bright and blue it is, and keen as steel.

‘How should I mean *Richard* Milbank, Maggie? Even when his uncle Thurle was alive, it was rare to see him at his post; but now that death has taken the old man, and Richard’s interest no longer urges him to attend to business, it is not likely that he would do so from mere duty. I meant John, of course.’

‘John was at the factory as usual,’ answered the girl quietly. She, too, was engaged in the same employment as her father, and apparently so wrapt in it that she did not even look up at him, though the blush that had risen to her very brow told that what he was saying did not

pass unheeded. She was of slight and graceful form, with sloe-black hair and eyes, and a complexion so very colourless that it suggested delicacy of constitution. It was no wonder that it should be so, for there was little fresh air to be got at Hilton, one of our great 'centres of industry' in the Midlands, and the Thornes lived in the heart of the town.

Their house was a substantial one enough, though small, and not having any appearance of a shop in its outward aspect. Mr. Thorne's customers were not the general public, but he served certain master manufacturers, among others, Matthew Thurle, now, however, lying dead at his little country-seat at Rosebank. His workshop was on the first-floor, and had the aspect of a savant's apartment, rather than that of a mechanic—the walls being hung with

scientific instruments of various kinds, and the tables strewn not only with articles of his trade, but with abstruse books, and papers full of calculations. The fact was, he was only a mechanic by necessity; by choice he was an inventor, and, as usual, he had suffered for his ingenuity. He found it difficult, even with the help of clever Maggie, to keep his head and hers above water—or rather, at the level, which, as it was, did but barely satisfy him. It was summer time, and the window of the back-room was opened wide, revealing a sort of arbour built upon the leads without, which a few inches of earth had transformed into a flower-plot.

‘You look pale, Maggie, darling; come out into the air for a few minutes; I want to speak to you.’ The old man stepped out into this improvised garden,

which, though bright with sweet-smelling blossoms, commanded no better view than the backs of houses like their own, and a broad, black space immediately beneath it, across which flashed, many times in every hour, with a roar and a rattle that shook the street, the trains of the London and Hilton Railway. It took a great deal of Maggie's spare time to cleanse this little Eden from the 'blacks' and other defilements which the iron horse thus cast upon it; but with the help of a little hand-engine, constructed by her father himself, she contrived to do so. The garden on the leads was the wonder of the neighbourhood, and especially its arbour, over which the creepers had been so skilfully trained that it formed a very tolerable bower, secure from prying eyes. Here Mr. Thorne took his seat; and after a minute

or two, during which she employed herself in methodically putting away her work—either from force of habit, or in order to gain time to marshal her thoughts in readiness for the coming interview—his daughter joined him.

‘When you were away, lass, this morning, I received an invitation to Mr. Thurle’s funeral. Did John speak of it, when you saw him at the factory?’

‘No, father; not a word.’ Her tone was cheerful, considering the subject of which she spoke; and her air was one of relief, as though she had expected him to broach some topic more unwelcome.

‘That was strange too,’ continued the old man, ‘since it was he himself who sent me the invitation.’

‘Then I think he ought not to have done so, returned Maggie quickly. ‘It

was taking too much upon himself. It was taking for granted—for one thing—that his elder brother would be disinherited, and that he would be his uncle's heir.'

'Nay, nay; you do John wrong—as you often do, Maggie. He wrote in his brother's name as well as his own; and there was no assumption at all about it. He did not *say* so; but my impression is Richard would have nothing to do with the matter at all. There is nothing more to be got from his uncle now; he has done his worst towards him, whatever it is; and Richard will not be at the pains to show respect for his memory.'

'That is not to be expected, father. Richard Milbank is not a hypocrite, whatever his faults may be.'

'Whereas John is!—Is that what your

words imply?' asked the old man sharply. 'In the case of any other girl,' he continued, since she did not reply, 'I should have expected no better judgment. John is too hard-working, too serious, too ascetic even (I grant that), not to suggest such a suspicion to light and frivolous natures; but I had hoped you were more clear-sighted. I know he is thought ill of by many men, too, because he has become a teetotaler.'

'That cannot be *my* reason, father, since I am a teetotaler myself,' answered Maggie with a faint smile.

'You know what I mean well enough, my dear. It is one thing not to drink wine or spirits, and another to take an oath never to do so. John has taken the oath—in the case of any other man in his position, I should say, has foolishly done so. But he has been

peculiarly situated; he has had an example before him such as might have driven any man to such a step.'

'I know that Richard takes more than is good for him, father,' observed Maggie coldly; 'you need not tell me that.'

'More than is good for him! My darling child, you little know what wretchedness and ruin are hidden beneath that simple phrase. He is a drunkard: you may gloze it over as you will. Unless a miracle takes place, he will become—it is only a question of time—a hopeless, incurable sot. I would spare you if I could.—You shake your head, and smile! Why, Heaven help me! do you suppose that I am wounding your tender heart with words like these, to please myself? It is because I am your father—the being who loves you better far than his own self

and all the world beside—that I am telling you the bitter truth. The surgeon's knife must needs cut deep as the disease.'

'You were saying that John has become a teetotaler from beholding the spectacle of Richard's unhappy failing,' observed Maggie evasively. 'I say that was not the reason, father. *He* was not tempted to drink, and therefore needed no such protection for himself. He took the oath, that it might come to his uncle's ears, and contrast him favourably with his brother in the old man's eyes—though he needed not to do so, since he knew himself to be the favoured one already.'

'You evade the question, Maggie, by blackening John—most cruelly and most unjustly too. But that is nothing to the purpose. Even if John were as

black as you would make him, that would not make Richard white. Listen to me, Maggie—listen, for it may be for the last time !’

A distant thunder from afar had grown and grown while he was speaking, till it began to roar about them ; the earth began to shake, the air to quiver, and presently the down express dashed close beneath them, and was swallowed in the neighbouring tunnel with a roar and a thud.

‘ So help me, Heaven !’ continued the old man, pointing with his finger to where the wreaths of steam were curling about the tunnel’s mouth, ‘ I would as soon you should lay yourself in the path of yonder screaming devil, and be crushed by it, as that you should marry Richard Milbank. You see his faults, you think, and hope to cure them. That is how foolish women

fling themselves after lost men, and are lost with them. I know the world well, Maggie, and believe me that is a hopeless venture. A man who at twenty-five has taken habitually to drinking—whose habits are idle—whose associates are wicked and debased—whose own fair fame has been foully smirched and blotched——’

‘By whom, father?’ cried the girl, rising suddenly from her seat, and speaking with intense energy. ‘Do you count the report of mischief-makers and scandal-mongers as proof of the fact—for what else is there to prove it?’

‘Common sense, Maggie. Look you—would you break off with this fellow, if you thought he had really done what rumour taxes him with? Or would you take him for your husband still, even as a felon?—You would not! Then you are

not utterly mad, as I had feared. Well, I will prove his guilt, then.' He held up one supple hand, and, with the forefinger of the other, checked off on it his facts and arguments. 'The circumstances are these. An old man is lying on what is supposed to be his death-bed in a lonely house. There is a deaf housekeeper in the kitchen (the sick-nurse being gone home to her cottage for half-an-hour, as usual, to take her evening meal), and not a soul beside under that roof. A man with a mask on his face, and otherwise disguised, comes with pistol in hand into the room, and compels the dying man to sign—some deed; he knows not what; he only sees the words *eight hundred pounds* above the place where he is forced to set his signature. This wretch departs, having gained his object—and without taking with him a single article

of value, of which there are many about the house. He was certainly, therefore, no common thief. Who *was* he, then? Who could possibly derive any benefit from such an outrageous act? One of two persons only it must have been—the rich man's nephews. The younger of these had already, as was generally supposed, been made his heir; no deed could make him better off than he was already.'

'I never said John Milbank did it, father,' observed Maggie quietly.

'My darling, let me finish. I am using that method of ratiocination which is called the exhaustive process, and I must have time. Of course, you never said so, nor did anybody else. John Milbank was in his proper place at the factory, as a dozen witnesses could prove, at that particular time; but he was not even

suspected, for the reason I have already given. On the other hand, Richard Milbank was *not* in his proper place, nor at any place of which he could give a satisfactory account, at the period in question. It is true that nothing came of it, for, as it happened, Mr. Thurle rallied, and lived for some months afterwards, during which he is said to have executed a fresh will. But the man who obtained his signature by force counted on his immediate decease, no doubt, and indeed he was almost the cause of it. Moreover, that man knew the ways of the house, and the hour at which the sick-nurse was wont to leave her charge; and he also knew—mark this!—that eight hundred pounds was exactly the sum at that time standing to Mr. Thurle's credit at his banker's. Now, who but two men in all the world could have commanded

such opportunities of knowledge ; and who but one man in all the world had the motive for committing such an action ? ’

Here Mr. Thorne brought one palm down upon the other sharply, in token that the speech for the prosecution was concluded, while, ‘Gentlemen of the jury,’ his face seemed to say, ‘you will surely give your verdict of “Guilty” without moving from your box.’ In this, however, he was mistaken.

‘You talk of motive, father,’ pleaded Maggie, shaping letters on the sanded floor with her little foot ; ‘but what motive could Richard have in committing this crime, when he must have known that any deed that he might compel Mr. Thurle to sign would, without the signature of a witness also, be mere waste-paper ? ’

‘Ah, *you* know that,’ responded the

engraver quickly, 'because you have had to do with papers and parchments all your life, and can engross as well as any attorney's clerk in England. But an ignorant man like Richard Milbank might not have known it. Moreover, as to witnesses, he might find a peck of them, after the event, among his unprincipled friends. Do you think Dennis Blake, for example, would not put his hand to any deed or document whatever for a five pound note? Ay, though it were one that sold his soul! No, Maggie! Your defence has broken down, and is none the better, let me add (as I heard a judge once say), for the reflections that you have cast upon another person.'

There was a long silence. Herbert Thorne looked pale, and older by a year or two in that short hour, for he knew that he had not carried his point on a

vital question. He was not only possessed of considerable scientific knowledge, but was in many respects a wise man. He had seen from the first the hopelessness of using any stronger measures against his daughter's passion for Richard Milbank than persuasion. If she would not give way to him, pleading as a father with right and reason on his side, she would certainly not have yielded to commands which could not be enforced. Maggie was of age, and quite competent to earn her own living by her pen; not as an authoress, indeed, but as a transcriber of manuscripts for the press—as an engrosser—as an engraver—and also as a painter of photographs: she had shown her neatness and dexterity in all these walks, and to some purpose. There were, in short, two skilled mechanics in that house. He was right, then, in using persuasion only;

nor was he to be blamed for putting before his daughter the true character of the dissolute man on whom she had set her heart. Where Herbert Thorne was wrong was in praising John Milbank, whom he would have had her choose for her husband at the expense of his brother—in exalting him, as it were, upon the ruins of that broken man. She resented this as only a woman can, and it made her cling to the ruins.

Father and daughter sat in silence for many minutes, during which another train—this time London-bound—rushed out from the tunnel, and roared past them. While the noise was still at its height—‘Did I not hear the bell ring?’ inquired the engraver, to whom the greater sound was so familiar as almost to pass unnoticed.

‘Yes, father; it is Richard,’ was the quiet reply.

The old man rose from his seat with a hopeless look. That she should know his very ring, seemed to convince him that her love was fixed indeed upon this good-for-naught.

‘Do you know what he is come for, Maggie?’ said he bitterly. ‘He is come to ask you to marry him, because he knows that to-morrow he will be a beggar!’ With that he walked hastily into the room and thence upstairs, only just in time to avoid the expected visitor.

CHAPTER II.

WRITTEN IN THE SAND.

MAGGIE rose, as if to follow her father, and avoid the coming interview; but, while she stood in doubt, a quick step was heard in the inner room, at which the colour rose in her white cheeks, and her bosom rose and fell tumultuously, in spite of the hand with which she strove to repress it.

‘Why, Maggie, I thought you had flown!’ cried an eager voice; ‘and yet, where should my pretty bird be found but in her garden!’

The speaker was a young man of five-

and-twenty or so, and strikingly handsome; he was of medium height, and somewhat robustly made—the sort of figure which, unless its possessor is careful in his habits, is sure to develop into corpulency; his face, too, though fair and comely, was of that florid hue which soon grows to a deeper tint than would be chosen by a painter to depict even the healthiest complexion; his voice, though distinct enough, had already acquired that roughness which is associated with the constant use of stimulants. But his hair, which was brown, and soft and curling, and eyes, blue and tender as the summer sky, might have suited Apollo himself.

Maggie was not in the arbour now, but standing in the sunlight, with, for aught Richard Milbank knew to the contrary, a hundred pairs of eyes regarding her from the surrounding houses, and yet, had she

permitted him, this audacious young fellow would have kissed her then and there. She stepped back, however, from his embrace, and held her hand out, not so much in greeting as to keep him at a respectable distance.

‘Why, Maggie darling, what’s the matter?’ inquired the visitor, a little discomforted by this rebuff. ‘Come into the arbour, dear, and tell me why you look so cruel.’

‘I can tell you here, Richard, quite as well,’ answered Maggie, as coldly as she could. Apollo had already dazzled her, in spite of those recent warnings, and of her own resolve, made but a minute ago, that she would *not* be dazzled. She had but just determination left to decline his invitation into the arbour, in which retreat she knew he would have got the better of her at once.

‘I am not cruel, Richard, nor even cross; but I am much displeased to see you in coloured clothes, with the only relative but one you have on earth lying dead in his coffin.’

‘I am sorry it frets you, Maggie; but I can’t wear black for a man like Uncle Thurle, who had never a good word for me, nor a good wish.’

‘Don’t say that, Richard, for I’m sure it is not true,’ answered the girl rebukefully. ‘His manner may have been unpleasant to you——’

‘Gad, it was!’ broke in the other, with a contemptuous laugh.

‘But he certainly did not wish you ill, Richard; far from it. If he could have seen you more diligent in business, and dutiful, and steady——’

‘I beg your pardon! I thought I was addressing Maggie Thorne,’ interrupted

the young man apologetically; 'instead of which it is her father, it seems, who is giving me one of his admirable lectures!'

'It would have been better for you to have listened to them, Richard; but you will listen to nobody.'

'Yes, I will, Maggie; I will listen to *you*—when you are speaking, that is, in your own proper person; and what is more, I will obey you.'

'Then you will get mourning for your uncle's funeral to-morrow, and wear it.'

'To hear is to obey, Maggie; it shall be done. I know an establishment at which discreet young men deal for ready money, where ready-made clothes are to be bought. I will go, not to its "mitigated grief department," but to its "most inconsolable woe ditto," and furnish myself with a suit of sables. It will go against the

grain with me, I promise you, but it shall be done. The length of my hat-band and the depth of my weepers shall shame John himself. If crocodiles' tears could be purchased, I would even shed them to please you; but I have reason to believe that my brother has bought up the entire stock.—It was about to-morrow that I have come to speak to you, Maggie,' added the young fellow, dropping his light tone, and speaking with emotion. 'In four-and-twenty hours my fate, you know, will be decided.'

'Indeed, I do not know it, Richard. Men's fates are decided for them, as I believe, by their own conduct; else what would be the use of fighting *against* fate? Supposing even that your uncle should leave you nothing——'

'A very reasonable supposition indeed, Maggie! That is, I suspect, exactly

what he has left me—bating some excellent advice, and perhaps a shilling to buy a rope with, or a razor.'

'I say, even in that case there is no need to despair of your future, Richard,' continued the girl firmly. 'You have youth, and health, and wit enough, though you waste it on flippant jokes.'

'It is her father!' mused the young man gravely. 'That is his style beyond dispute, yet I never saw a man with such a pretty foot.'

'Richard, you are incorrigible!' cried Maggie, beating the praised foot upon the gravel impatiently; 'and I have half a mind to dismiss you altogether from my heart!'

'If you have half a mind to keep me there, that is all I can hope for,' answered the other penitently, 'and a great deal more than I deserve. O Maggie!' cried

he, throwing out his arms, and speaking with passionate energy, ‘do you suppose I am blind to what I am and to what you are? Do I need your father’s arguments, or any man’s, to convince me of the ruin that I have brought upon myself by my own folly? It is the consciousness of all that that makes advice and reproof intolerable to a fellow like me. What is the use of crying over spilt milk? What can the most reckless do, beyond giving his honour not to spill any more? I do give it—I came here to give it—not to your father, who once told me he would not believe me on my oath—but to *you*; I came to throw myself on your mercy’—they were in the arbour now, for he had seized her hand and drawn her thither, and she had not resisted. ‘I have erred and sinned; yes, sinned, my girl, beyond anything that

your pure heart can dream of; but I repent me of it all. The confession is humiliating enough, and you will not make it more bitter, as others would do.'

'Heaven knows I will not make it more bitter, Richard!' sighed Maggie, keeping him at arm's length still, and averting her eyes from his pleading face.

'“But is this remorse genuine—is this true?” you would say,' interrupted the other eagerly. 'It *is* true—it *is* genuine! I have made a false start in life; or, rather, I have gone the wrong side of the post, Maggie, and lost the race that way; but all this may yet be retrieved. If I had some one to love me, and to guide me, I am sure it would be retrieved. Your wise head would keep me straight; your loving arms would restrain me from evil ways. I don't know what will happen to-morrow. The old man may

have relented at the last, and done me justice. If so, so much the better for us both. But if not, I have still enough to take us both across the seas—to America.'

'What! and leave my father? Never!' She drew herself back from him at the bare thought. Then her father's parting words recurred to her remembrance: 'He is come to ask you to marry him because he knows that to-morrow he will be a beggar;' and she once more relented towards her lover: he was incapable of a baseness, and she seemed to owe him a reparation for having listened to a suggestion to the contrary.

'You love your father, then, more than me!' cried Richard.

'I wish I did!' thought Maggie bitterly.

'Why should these old people for ever cross the path of youth?' continued the

young man vehemently. ‘If my uncle would have permitted us to marry, all would have been well; and now your father is the obstacle.—Don’t be afraid, Maggie’ (for his passion was terrible to witness, and she shrank before it); ‘it is my love for you that makes me wild. I came to-day to ask you to be my wife, because I had so great a trust in your love that I thought, “Even at this lowest ebb of my fortunes, she will not refuse me.”’

She shivered, and sighed, and shut her eyes. If women had been the chief customers of the house of Thurle and Co., Richard Milbank would have been the best man of business in that establishment, instead of the worst. He knew well that, with a girl such as Maggie Thorne, his very misfortunes would be the most eloquent pleaders for him.

‘It is not much, indeed, that I have to

offer you, Maggie,' he went on; 'perhaps nothing beyond a loving heart and these willing hands. They shall henceforth, however, work diligently for you, dearest, if you will let them. They shall be your bread-winners, if bread is to be won.'

'I am not afraid of starving, Richard,' replied the girl, with a touch of pride. 'It is not the fear of *that* which would deter me from becoming your wife.'

'What, *then*?' inquired he quickly. 'Is it the fear of my breaking my good resolutions? Will you not trust me? Will you not believe me?'

'I believe you, Richard: I am sure you mean what you say.'

'But you would have proofs? I had thought that true love was more confiding;' his tone was sorrowful, and full of tender pleading, but the glance which accompanied it, and fell upon her down-

drooped face, was impatient, disappointed, angry even. 'Well, what matters?' continued he. 'It is not as if I came to say : "Will you marry me to-morrow, Maggie?" I only ask from you the assurance that you will be mine. Then, whatever change of fortune happens, I shall be content. Whatever may be lost, I shall still have won. My own dear, darling Maggie, tell me that you will one day be mine!—You do not answer!' cried he, drawing her closer towards him; 'but your silence speaks for you as sweetly as any words! On the ground yonder I read your answer, too, which was written before I put the question.' He pointed to the sanded floor, on which, as she had sat by her father's side, she had mechanically traced the letters of her lover's name—'R. M.' 'May I take my happiness for granted, love? Your cheek is white, but I will

change this lily to a rose.' So saying, he pressed his lips to hers, and she, with a low, soft cry, half-sigh, half-sob, returned his kiss. And thus they plighted troth. He would have repeated the pleasant ceremony, but that she withdrew from his passionate embrace.

'Go, Richard! go!' cried she. 'I have done your bidding; your fate and mine are henceforth one; but you must leave me now.'

'I am your slave, dear Maggie, now and for ever, and must obey you. For the present, then, good-bye. To-morrow may have good news in store for us, after all.'

'Do not count upon it, Richard. Nor is it riches, even if you should be rich, that will make you happy.'

'I know it, Maggie; for, rich or poor, I am now sure of happiness. But if the

old man has relented, it may be realized at once. Think of that, sweetheart. And meanwhile, good-bye, my own, my very own !’

With a kiss snatched from her forehead, for she had covered her face with her hands, he left the harbour, and the next minute she heard the front-door close behind him. He was gone, and had taken her heart ; yet well she knew it was not in safe keeping.

Her eyes fell upon those two tell-tale letters upon the ground, and she erased them, slowly and reluctantly, with her foot.

‘ Vows written in sand !’ sighed she. ‘ It is an evil omen. I have done wrong ; yet how could I do otherwise ? O Richard, Richard ! I have given myself to you, in spite of my own heart’s foreboding. Do not betray my trust.’

CHAPTER III.

THE BROTHERS.

THERE are some natures that never count the cost of anything they can obtain on credit, but think only of the gratification of the moment; but this could not be said with justice of Richard Milbank; he thought only of his own personal gratification, it is true, but he sometimes looked forward to it a week, or even a month, in advance. He had come that afternoon, just as Mr. Thorne had foreseen, while yet a chance of prosperity remained to him, to persuade Maggie to become his wife; and, if possible, upon

the instant—that is, as soon as the law would permit it—to marry her. Of ‘saving common-sense’ he had none, and even his wits (of which he had plenty) were rendered almost wholly useless to him, from his excessive egotism. Having decided upon some line of conduct conducing to his own pleasure, he did not give himself the trouble to place himself in the position of the person through whom the pleasure was to be obtained—an omission that forms the social safeguard of the world, which would else be at the feet of the Selfish. But even he perceived that to have put off his proposal until he was actually pronounced a beggar by his uncle’s will, would lay him open to some suspicion of selfishness. As it was, the meagre hope of his having been left something by old Matthew Thurle, was the rag with which he

covered his shamelessness. He had offered himself to Maggie, whether he should be rich or poor; 'and what more,' said he to himself, 'could be expected of any man?'

He was very fond of Maggie—after his fashion: prouder of her, when she was present, than of any other girl in the world; but in her absence, her image did not by any means so monopolize his heart as to prevent it receiving other impressions. Those who were the most charitable to Richard Milbank's faults lamented his 'extreme susceptibility;' others called him a dissolute and abandoned fellow. As to his protestations of penitence and resolutions of amendment, it would have been a compliment to call them moonshine: they were not even a genuine reflection of virtue. He adopted them as expressions most likely to please

Maggie's ear ; just as, had she been of a more frivolous disposition, he would have used the language of flattery or passion. If there was any recognized calling in life in which he would have succeeded, it would have been that of the stage-lover ; for whether the object of his adoration had been a 'singing chambermaid' or a 'serious widow,' he would have played his part equally well. The wits of most sharp people run to making money, and there stagnate, as in a pond of yellow mud ; but those of Richard ran to making love. They had also another channel—which the virtuous vaguely call 'gambling transactions ;' but in this he was not so successful, though equally diligent. This man, however, was not a mere selfish voluptuary. When passion was aroused he became reckless of all consequences, not only to others, but to himself.

Disappointment did not sour him—for vinegar is not made in a moment—but rendered him at once both desperate and dangerous. To conclude this slight sketch of Mr. Richard Milbank's character, we must add in fairness that, in addition to the great attraction of his looks, he was what is termed (by a not very discerning class of critics, however) exceedingly 'good company,' and was the idol of his particular public—which was to be found for the most part within the walls of the *Sans Souci* club, at Hilton, and was confined even there to two apartments, the card-room and the billiard-room. It is thither that he is now walking, with a face more than ordinarily flushed, and a look of triumph in his large blue eyes which curiously contrasts with the frown above them.

‘She is mine,’ mutters he to himself, ‘though not on my own terms. She will keep her promise now, no matter what happens. Though John may have robbed me of the money that should have been mine, he will miss the prize he has chiefly aimed at—and I shall win it—— Well, what is it?’ The last words are uttered aloud, in a rough, rude tone, and addressed to one who has stopped him in the street—a man of about his own age, tall and fair, and comely as himself, yet by no means like him in other respects. The unhealthy flush upon Richard’s cheek is in this case merely a wholesome colour, slightly heightened, however, by the present rencontre; the flowing beard is absent, and the brown hair does not curl so crisply; it is long, and has the appearance of being thrown back, like the hair of angels carved in stone: the expression of the

face, too, if not angelic, is patient, tender, and serious.

‘I want to have a few words with you, Richard.’

‘If you want to have words with me, I will not balk you,’ answered the other scornfully. ‘But I shall not pick and choose for *mine*, I warn you.’

‘You shall not have the pretence of quarrel, brother, if I can help it. I wish to speak to you for your own good.’

‘That is so like Mr. Morality!’ returned Richard, with a sneering laugh. ‘You are always Harry the good boy, and I Tommy the bad. “For my own good,” forsooth! It was for my good, I suppose, that you gained my uncle’s ear, and poisoned it against me, so that he has cut me off with a shilling! “Being thus without the means of self-indulgence, my dear brother Richard,” you say to your-

self, “must needs become temperate, and diligent, and sober, and will have cause to bless me for the *good* I have done him.”

—Bah, you hypocrite!’

‘You do me wrong, brother; but to that I am accustomed——’

‘There he goes again!’ interrupted Richard: ‘it is Tartuffe himself: “Pray, spit upon me; I like to be spat upon!” Upon my soul, John, I have half a mind to gratify you!’ And with an exclamation of disgust and loathing, he spat upon the ground.

‘You will not allow me to talk with you and keep my self-respect, it seems,’ continued John Milbank, the colour in his cheek as deep by this time as that his brother wore; ‘I will therefore give my warning, and have done with it. You have coloured clothes, I see; let me advise you to put on black ones; and, at

all events—unless you wish to learn better ways in the school of adversity in the manner you just spoke of—do not omit to attend the funeral to-morrow.’

‘What, in the Fiend’s name, do you mean? Is it possible that you have the assurance to dictate to me as to what I think proper to wear, or to do! Why, one would think you had seen our uncle’s will, and, as his heir, were already lording it over your beggared brother!’

‘I have not seen his will; but I know—no matter how—so much of its contents as to say that there is hope for you yet, if you will but pay a decent respect to his memory.’

‘What! he’ll be there himself, will he, the unnatural old scoundrel, and execute a codicil! I defy him to do that, for, under the circumstances, he must needs set fire to the parchment.

If he could have taken his money with him, as somebody says, it would all have *melted* by this time.'

'Matthew Thurle is passed out of our judgment,' returned John Milbank gravely, 'and I will not hear him slandered. I have cleared my conscience, and given you your warning—whether you take it or not lies with yourself, Richard.' He was about to move away, when the other laid his hand upon his arm.

'One moment, John; you have forgotten something.'

'Have I so? What is it?'

'You have forgotten to finish off your little speech; after the words "Cleared my conscience, and given you warning," you should have added: "And now I wash my hands of you, Tommy!" The hypocrites never conclude anything, you know, without washing their hands!'

For an instant, when his brother had said, 'You have forgotten something,' John Milbank had been in hopes that he was touched by the effort which he had honestly made to avert his worldly ruin; but one look at his mocking face had been sufficient to dissipate this hope, and he had turned upon his heel before the last insulting words had been fully spoken. Richard watched his retiring form with a grim smile.

'That is a man who, avoiding wines and dainty meats—which inflame the flesh—is said to live on porridge, and he might have saved his breath to cool it! Yes, yes, my friend; it is likely enough you should wish to be friends, knowing how you have robbed me. It would be a fine thing, indeed, if you could oust me from the old man's will and live like a lord at Rosebank, while

I am a pauper, and yet keep yourself on good terms with your victim! Better still, good Master John, if you could take wicked Tommy's sweetheart away from him and marry her yourself—also for his good, no doubt. If it had not been that I had got the whip-hand of him there, I should not have kept my temper so easily. What the deuce did the fellow mean with his "There is hope for you yet"? Does he call the chance of a five pound note to buy a mourning-ring with "hope"? Confound him! What does he mean by telling me to change these clothes, and be at the funeral to-morrow? Why, he means to save his own credit, no doubt. If I should not be there, it would be a protest against my uncle's injustice, and indirectly against himself, for having taken advantage of it. That is as clear

as crystal. As it happens, Brother John, I do mean to be at the funeral, though not because of anything that *you* have said. Ah, if you only knew whose pretty face and cherry lips had persuaded me, you would not perhaps have been quite so smooth-tongued! If I could only have got her to marry me to-day, and appear among them all to-morrow with Maggie tucked under my arm! *That* would be a triumph worth all Uncle Thurle's money, and would have snuffed out Mr. John's exultation pretty completely. However, it's almost as good as that already. I'm in luck to-day, and shall go in for a "plunge" on the strength of it.' Then, sticking his hat rakishly on one side and whistling gaily, he pursued his way to the club.

CHAPTER IV.

THE 'SANS SOUCL.'

'THE CLUB' at Hilton, as it was designated by its frequenters—and rightly so, since there was no other similar establishment in the town—was a building so large and handsome that it might have dared comparison with many of its metropolitan brethren; but this scale of grandeur had necessitated that its members should be more numerous than select. While, therefore, it numbered amongst them the parliamentary representatives of the borough and many scions of the county families, and almost all the members

male of the local aristocracy, it was forced to extend itself beyond these limits, and to admit individuals of inferior rank, and whose qualifications for club society were chiefly comprised in their ability to pay the entrance-money and subscriptions. It had been fondly hoped that the considerable expense of these would have deterred 'the tag-rag and bob-tail'—as the large manufacturers in Hilton were given to designate their less wholesale brethren—from desiring to be admitted to the *Sans Souci*, whereas this was the very class that was found most ambitious of the honour, and who paid their money with the greatest cheerfulness. On the first starting of the club, a few of them had been admitted, as we have said, from necessity; but these, like 'the small edge of the wedge,' had made way for the entrance of their friends

en masse; and when the more aristocratic members would have closed the flood-gates, they had found the stream of democracy too strong for them; they were out-voted in their own palace, and from thenceforth condemned to confine their exclusiveness to shrugs of the shoulders and liftings of the eyelids. Far be it from us to suggest that 'lower dock-yard people,' to use Mr. Jingle's definition of social inequality, are necessarily inferior in good behaviour to 'upper dock-yard people,' retail folks to wholesale, or the 'poor but honest' class of the community generally to 'swells' of any description. But the interlopers at the *Sans Souci* were of a peculiar and objectionable kind. They were not the lesser order of manufacturers themselves, but their sons and nephews, who aspired to 'sink the shop,' and who endeavoured to

show themselves the equals of their social superiors by out-bidding them in the extravagance of their club dinners, and the amount of their stakes at cards. Old Matthew Thurle, for instance, a much respected man in his way, but in a comparatively small way of business as an employer of labour, would never have dreamed of thrusting himself into the society of the magnates of Hilton; whereas Richard Milbank, his nephew, having been left by his father with a few hundreds a year of his own, had joined the *Sans Souci* on the very first opportunity, and had spent and lost more money there than most of its frequenters. The club, in its outward aspect, was still as respectable as its founders could have desired: the dining-room, indeed, was occasionally occupied by parties of young men who loved champagne, not wisely,

but too well, and whose loud laughter would cause some potent and reverend senior, taking his port in dignified solitude, to level at them his double eye-glasses in reprehension or contempt; but the well-stocked library was as silent as the grave, and much less extensively tenanted; the strangers'-room froze your blood with its cold seclusion; and in the stately drawing-room, save for the falling leaf (of a newspaper), or the dropping of a coal in the fire-place, there was an unbroken hush at all times. It was to these rooms that the original members of the *Sans Souci* for the most part confined themselves. They knew nothing, or affected to know nothing, of the 'goings on' in the card-room and the billiard-room. In the former, afternoon play had been of late established, a thing which, common enough in London, is

thought in itself to be an improper proceeding in the provinces, and the stakes were rumoured to be high—very much higher than the rules of the club countenanced, which, indeed, were set at defiance altogether. The committee had been appealed to, it was true, for the correction of this innovation; but *quis custodiet*, etc., who shall commit a committee man? The majority of the executive of the *Sans Souci*, as it was now constituted, were sinners in this respect themselves.

It is up to the card-room, three stories high, and placed thereby out of the supervision of venerable seniors, unless possessed of respiratory powers seldom allotted to their epoch of life, that Richard Milbank takes his way. It is an apartment that affects a dim and chastened gloom, that might seem adapted to quite

another purpose. The blinds are drawn down over the windows, and the only light from within is that afforded by wax candles fastened into the card-tables, and surmounted by green shades, so as to shield the glare from the eyes of the players. Many of them are already assembled, for Richard, usually a most punctual attendant, has been delayed to-day by his visit to Maggie. A chorus of reproving voices greets his appearance.

‘Dick Milbank late for school; you shall have a bad mark!’ cries one florid-faced old gentleman, the Falstaff of the card-room—Mr. Roberts. He was once a banker in Hilton, but having had some disagreement with his firm, retired from it, and has had for years no other occupation than that in which he is now engaged.

‘His bad mark is to come to-morrow.

—Is not that so, Dick?’ inquired another, looking up for a moment from his cards. This is Lawyer Gresham, whose presence in the *Sans Souci* is not owing to its new blood at all (upon which circumstance he secretly prides himself), but to the influence of a certain borough member, said to be much indebted for his seat for Hilton to this gentleman’s electioneering skill. The clever tactics that had stood Mr. Gresham in such good social stead during election time—his tact, his knowledge of mankind, his finesse—are fully as useful to him at the whist-table; and even though so successful at that game, he would yet be popular but for a certain malicious humour which he cannot control.

‘Attend to your game, and don’t remind a man of his misfortunes, Gresham,’ says the ex-banker rebukefully. ‘Besides,

though the show of hands is certainly against our friend, he may come out at the head of the poll, after all.—May you not, Dick? You don't wear your uncle's colours, though, I see, eh?'

Everybody laughs at 'Falstaff's' sally, which is directed against the new-comer's gay clothes.

'I shall put them on to-morrow at the hustings,' answers Richard audaciously.

'Your brother is wearing them already,' continued Mr. Roberts; 'he was looking so very sombre in the street to-day, that it struck me he would have no woeful looks left for to-morrow's ceremony, and I had a good mind to recommend him to black his face. However, I am sure I hope, as we all do, that he will not play Jacob to your Esau, and rob you of your birthright.'

'Hear, hear!' answered more than one

voice ; for Richard, as we have already said, was really popular in his own circle, and besides, he had very bad luck at cards.

‘ Yes, indeed, let us hope it will all come right,’ observed Mr. Gresham, ‘ for we shall all be *sorry to lose you*, my good fellow.’

This was a barbed shaft, for everybody knew that if Richard Milbank should be disinherited by his uncle he would have no more money to venture.

‘ Come and cut in here, and win Gresham’s money ; that’s the only way to stop his mouth, Dick!’ cried Mr. Roberts good-humouredly ; ‘ we are playing “ pounds and fives.” ’

Sovereign points and five pounds on the rubber are heavy stakes for any gentleman in a small way of business, and Richard generally confined himself to

the points without the bet, which was euphoniously termed 'flat pounds;' but, as we have seen, he considered himself in luck's way to-day, and had come to the club with the intention of having 'a plunge'—a phrase which describes not only a cold bath, but also a determination to gamble. He therefore touched the whist-table with his hand, in token that he intended to cut in when the rubber should be concluded.

As he did so, 'Dick, a word with you!' whispered a voice in his ear.

The whisperer was one of his most intimate associates—a young man of his own age, very dark and swarthy, and of herculean proportions, by name Dennis Blake. This man had led the same sort of life as Richard himself; had gone a little faster, perhaps, and sunk a little lower in the mud, but of that there were

no outward traces in his case. He had a frame and constitution that, for the present, bade defiance to all inroads.

‘Look here, Dick,—it’s against the rules, you know,’ observed this gentleman, taking Milbank aside, ‘for you to cut in at that table.’

‘Rules ! What rules ?’ inquired the other impatiently, as though rules were not very binding in his eyes, at all events, but that any which might interfere with his own pleasures were, *ipso facto*, absurd and powerless.

‘Well, it was settled by the committee last night, old fellow, that if a man had not paid his debts of the previous day, he was not to sit down to play. I don’t refer to your debts to *me*, you know,’ added the speaker hastily, perceiving Richard’s face to darken till it almost reached the complexion of his own : ‘of

course, *I* know you're as straight as a die, but there are other creditors of yours here who might make themselves unpleasant. I thought I would put you on your guard.'

Richard was well aware that this own peculiar friend of his, Dennis Blake—'Denny,' as he sometimes called him, 'for love and euphony'—was speaking two words for himself, and one for the 'other creditors;' yet it would have hardly suited him to say so, since it must needs have provoked an open rupture. Moreover, he wanted to play, and his wish was ever a law to him.

'Oh, thanks,' said he dryly; 'but I think I'll risk it. Whatever happens, I shall settle with everybody to-morrow, you know, yourself included.'

Richard Milbank did really intend to 'settle with everybody,' if he found him-

self mentioned to any considerable figure in his uncle's will ; if not, he would also settle with them, in the sense of never entering the doors of the club again, or having a word to say to them. He had still a few hundreds left—for he was not so foolish as to denude himself of ready-money, if it could possibly be avoided—enough to keep himself for a week or two, and afterwards—when he should have persuaded Maggie to marry him, as he felt confident of doing—to defray the expenses of his honeymoon ; and beyond that period it was not his nature to concern himself.

‘ Well, if you really are going to pay to-morrow, Dick, honour bright,’ hesitated Blake ; ‘ only the notion *here* is ’ (and the speaker looked about him with a deprecating air) ‘ that it is all up with your expectations. You can’t

wonder at fellows looking sharp after their money : it's every one for himself, you know, in this room.'

'Is it?' replied Richard bitterly. 'It seems to me, Blake, that some of you fellows are just a little greedy. You have had a good deal of my money among you.'

'That may be : but if they have won of you, they have lost to others.'

It was curious to remark how this gentleman would persist in putting 'they' for 'you :' the thing that he perhaps still called his conscience, dead to ordinary questions of right and wrong, had still some vitality in this particular matter, and taxed him with greed and harshness to his friend. It was still more curious to observe how quietly the other took his interference. Neither advice nor warning would Richard Milbank have

submitted to for an instant from lips the most reverend and authoritative; and as for menace, he would have resented it with the most passionate audacity. He was savage with Blake, of course, and would have discharged his obligation to him by pushing him over an alpine precipice, had a safe opportunity offered, with a great deal of satisfaction; but the uppermost desire in his mind at present was to have his 'plunge;' and the whim of the moment, as usual with him, was stronger than aught else. Without replying to his friend's last rejoinder, he moved towards the table, and as the rubber chanced to be just then brought to a conclusion, he cut in.

It is not necessary to follow his fortunes; suffice it to say that, like the majority of presentiments that occur to us (though we only remember those

that are fulfilled), his notion that he was in luck that day was not realized with respect to the possession of good cards. He 'put on' the money—as gamblers (most anomalously) do—with the intention of 'pulling it off' again, but it was always pulled off by his adversaries. In the end, he lost all he had in his pocket and increased his already considerable debt to Dennis Blake by fifty pounds. This last, it was true, concerned him very little, since, if things went badly for him in the will, he never intended to pay him a shilling. But not daring to play on credit with any one else, he had encroached upon the sum he had designed for the expenses of his honeymoon, which would now have to be curtailed to three weeks at farthest. Even to reckless Richard, the future looked gloomy that evening, as he took

his way to the Jew clothier's to furnish himself forth with a suit of 'inconsolables,' as the shopman termed it, against the all-important morrow.

CHAPTER V.

THE WILL.

ROSEBANK, the residence of the late Matthew Thurle, steel-plate manufacturer, was a picturesque cottage, situated so much at the extremity of the suburbs of Hilton as to be called without flattery a country-house. It had a large garden, full of the sweet-scented flowers from which the place derived its name; and the cultivation of them had been its owner's hobby. He had spent money on little else, for his tastes had been simple, as is usually the case with those who have made their own way in the

world. Time was, and not so long ago, when Matthew Thurle had been in but a small way of business, and had had to borrow the money requisite for certain improvements in the machinery of his trade, which had subsequently yielded him a golden harvest; and the man who had lent it to him was Herbert Thorne. They had been friends from boyhood, and their pursuits in manhood had been similar, though not identical. They were equally diligent, equally sober, equally sagacious—but the wits of the one had taken a practical turn, and those of the other a theoretical. It was no wonder, therefore, that the former thrived in the world, and the latter found himself, at fifty years of age, a considerably less prosperous man than when he had started in life. Thurle had repaid his debt, with the legal

interest, and would have repaid the obligation also, if Thorne had suggested to him any mode of doing so. With respect to this matter, mankind are divided into three classes: the first, and most numerous, are neither ready nor willing to show their sense of past favours; the second are willing, but not ready without pressure; and the third—so small, as to be hardly called a class—are both ready and willing. Thurle belonged to the second class. He might, in his turn, have advanced money to his former creditor to procure certain patents; one, especially, for the preparation of a peculiar ink which its inventor had entitled ‘terminable,’ and that promised to repay him for years of thought and toil—but not having been applied to for the advance, he had shut his eyes to his friend’s obvious need of it, and

turned the money over and over again in his own business. It was pleasant to him to see it grow and grow there ; and for the sake of that pleasure he denied himself almost every other, including that of benefiting his old school-fellow and companion. His household at Rosebank was decreased in inverse proportion to his means, until it consisted of but a single in-door servant, though no less than three gardeners were employed in the propagation of his roses. He entertained his friends so rarely and so sparingly, that they gradually dropped away from him, till he became that most pitiable of spectacles, an old man without a friend. He had two nephews, it was true, of whom the younger, John Milbank, was a man in some respects after his own heart—diligent, studious, averse to dissipation of all kinds, and

who showed a remarkable aptitude for the business in which he had embarked his own darling gold; yet, curiously enough, he could never, as he himself expressed it, 'take to' John. His affection had centred upon Richard, the ne'er-do-well, the profligate, and it had clung to him despite many a rude shock.

There were reasons for this besides the liking for him, which needs no reason, and which weighs with most of us in such cases—though it was strange it should so weigh with *him*—more heavily than all the virtues in the opposite scale. In the first place, Richard was, or had been, made in a great measure independent of him by his father's will; whereas John had little beyond his salary as his uncle's assistant: this possession of comparative wealth gave the former an importance in the

gold-dazzled eyes of old Matthew ; and he would gladly have enriched the nephew who did not (as he imagined) need his riches, although he had not deserved them, at the expense of his diligent brother, but that he felt that in Richard's hands the business which he had created and toiled for for so many years, and which he loved like a sentient creature, would without doubt go to ruin. In the second place, Richard had pleased the old man by his choice of a sweetheart in Maggie Thorne. He was not so blinded by mere money as not to recognize money's worth, and he saw in the clever, hard-working girl a valuable helpmate to any man, and to Richard the very guide and safeguard of which his frivolity and imprudence (for it was thus he mildly designated his favourite nephew's vices) made him stand so much

in need. What weighed with him also, perhaps, no less was, that he looked upon the match as a discharge in full for the obligation which in time past he had incurred to Maggie's father, and which his conscience secretly reproached him for not having recognized more directly. It is only of late years that the charity bestowed after death—that of 'benevolent founders,' 'munificent testators,' and so forth—has been estimated at its due moral value (expressed arithmetically as nought divided by number one); and perhaps Matthew Thurle may be excused for imagining that he was doing a handsome thing in thus giving away what cost him nothing—namely, his consent to his nephew's union; but he was certainly blameworthy in the selfish complacency with which he regarded the sacrifice of

Maggie herself, who was at least as likely to suffer from Richard's proprietorship as the 'business.'

Thus matters had stood when Mr. Thurle had been attacked by his last illness; but he had exhibited more severity towards his scapegrace nephew than he had really felt; and under the idea that his name would not appear in his uncle's will, Richard—as it was generally believed and whispered—had committed the outrage of which we have already spoken. At all events, some person had obtained by force the old man's signature to some document under the circumstances described, and it was certainly very suspicious that on his partial recovery Mr. Thurle had instituted no steps for the apprehension of the offender. Under the influence of his immediate alarm, he had at first made known the matter; but he had since

been very reluctant to speak of it; and the impression of those who knew him best was, that he had come to the conclusion that Richard Milbank — his favourite nephew, and indeed the only man for whom he had ever entertained what could be termed affection—and no other, had been the would-be robber. The circumstance that he had never sent for Richard since, even to bid him farewell, greatly corroborated the public opinion in this respect, and it was concluded by all, save Lawyer Linch and one other, that the elder nephew's name would not appear in the old man's will at all.

Curiosity as to this matter—though it would not thereby be satisfied—brought a good many persons to the funeral of Matthew Thurle; old acquaintances came, with whom, before the disease of getting and saving had settled upon him, he had

been on familiar terms ; and these the presence of some young fellows interested in Richard's fortunes, but by no means affected by the melancholy of the occasion, greatly scandalized. But after the ceremony was over, those who were privileged by invitation to repair to Rosebank and hear the last testament of the deceased were few indeed. They comprised the family lawyer, Mr. Linch—a lay preacher in the sect to which Mr. Thurle had belonged, and who had opened his eyes very wide indeed at seeing Richard at the cemetery—Richard himself, pale and anxious, but with a devil-may-care air that strangely contrasted with his funereal garb ; John, a little more quiet and thoughtful than usual, perhaps, but without any demonstrations of woe—which in his case would certainly have been out of place enough ; he had done

his uncle's bidding through life without pleasing him, and only now was about to enter into his reward; Mrs. Morden, the deaf housekeeper, who had come unasked up to the parlour—to 'look after' her own interests, as Mr. Linch afterwards jestingly remarked, since it was impossible she could hear what fortune might be in store for her; Herbert Thorne, the steel-plate engraver; and last, but by no means least in the eyes of three of the company, and the cynosure of all of them, his daughter. Why Maggie was there—for she had not been of the assemblage at the cemetery, which had been confined to males—was a question only herself could answer. She had announced her intention of being present, at breakfast that morning, to her father in her quiet, resolute way, and he had made no effort to oppose it. Whatever her motive, he

thought it would be good for her to hear what the dead man had to say respecting Richard Milbank, for he expected some plain speaking; and Maggie expected it, too, and went to comfort Richard. He thought she had never looked so beautiful as in her mourning clothes, and even whispered as much in her delicate ear. But she looked very grave, and turned her head away, as though the occasion was ill-chosen for such compliments. The scene, indeed, was serious and sombre enough, as the lawyer took his seat at the table, with the will in his hand; while the rest, forming a half-circle in front of him, sat all more or less expectant, awaiting its contents. The windows, which opened to the ground, had been set wide, for the afternoon was sultry, and through them came the summer air, heavy and faint with rose odours,

bringing with them to all present the memory of the dead man.

‘He must have had something gentle and tender about him,’ reflected Maggie, ‘after all, to have been so fond of flowers: surely, he will not carry his severity to poor Richard beyond the tomb.’

These hopeful thoughts were interrupted by Mr. Lynch’s short, dry cough, with which he always commenced what he called ‘a statement.’

‘This is the last will and testament of our late friend, Mr. Matthew Thurle,’ said he, ‘executed in my presence, and duly witnessed, on the sixth of June last—only a few weeks before his decease.’

Discarding its legal phraseology, and rejecting the moral and religious aphorisms with which it was curiously interspersed, so that it resembled less a will than a

sermon, the document provided as follows :—

First, if ‘ my nephew, Richard Milbank, shall, from any cause, save that of illness, absent himself from my funeral, or attend it without decent mourning apparel, he shall, *ipso facto*, be deprived of any benefits intended for him as hereafter written.’

At this, Maggie cast a bright and rapid glance at her lover, as though she would have said : ‘ See what would have happened, had I not persuaded you to behave with due respect ! ’ But, to her surprise, he did not even look towards her : his gaze was fixed upon the floor with a frowning brow. He was, in fact, consumed with rage and chagrin : with rage, that his uncle should have laid this commandment on him—also because he had obeyed it, as might be imagined, out of fear ; and

with chagrin, that he should seem to be indebted to John for his escape from disinheritance. It was true that he had been persuaded by Maggie, before his brother had spoken to him, to attend the funeral; but John could not have known that, and his intentions had therefore been generous and well-meant, and clearly laid him under a strong obligation.

‘You will allow me to say, Mr. Richard,’ said the lawyer, looking up at him from his papers, ‘as an old friend of your family, and one who has known you from a child, that I am glad to see you here; not only on your own account, but on that of your deceased uncle, to whom, if he knows what is happening here, I am sure your presence will give pleasure.’

‘My deceased uncle will be easily pleased, then,’ replied Richard coolly; ‘for, as it happens, I am here out of no respect

for his memory whatever, but to please Miss Thorne yonder.'

'Tut, tut, tut,' said Mr. Linch; 'this is very sad.'

'Moreover,' continued Richard, with an effort, 'I am bound to say that my brother John gave me a hint that it would be better for my prospects that I should be here to-day; and though it did not affect my resolution, for the reason I have already given, and to which Miss Thorne will testify, I beg to acknowledge his'—he was about to say 'generosity,' but stopped himself, and substituted for it—'good intentions.'

'This will, to my knowledge, has never been out of my hands,' remarked Mr. Linch, turning sharply on John Milbank.

'My uncle informed me of its first provision,' observed John quietly, 'and in such a manner that I was led to the con-

clusion that he wished my brother to be informed of it.'

'It was a very generous and brotherly act,' exclaimed Mr. Linch, with unwonted enthusiasm.

'Had you not better proceed with the will,' remarked Richard sullenly, 'and preach your sermon afterwards to those who may remain to hear it?'

Mr. Linch bit his lip, and the colour came into his cheeks; the lay preacher was much given to hold discourses both in season and out of it, but the lawyer was well aware that he had exceeded his professional duties on the present occasion. Without rejoinder or further comment, therefore, he proceeded to read the provisions of the will.

The whole of the dead man's wealth, almost all of which was invested in the factory, was devised to his two nephews

on the following conditions: they were to be partners in the business, which was not to be disposed of; and they were to live together at Rosebank, at least for the ensuing twelve months. The reasons for this curious proviso were also given. 'By working side by side with John, and especially by living under the same roof with him, I look to see Richard become another man through his brother's example. I lay this injunction also upon my elder nephew—for my old friend Herbert Thorne's sake—that he does not marry Maggie Thorne for a twelvemonth from this date. In that time, having money at his disposal, and being his own master, it will be seen whether Richard is fit to be trusted with Maggie's fate. If he marries her earlier, he thereby forfeits all that I have above bequeathed to him, which thereupon will

fall to his brother absolutely. And whosoever shall leave Rosebank during the above period, and live elsewhere, apart from his brother, shall similarly lose what I have left to him, which shall then revert to the other.'

There were many such stringent regulations and enactments, but all aimed more or less to draw the brothers together, with the express intention of benefiting the elder; at the same time that the very precautions implied that he was a reprobate and a good-for-naught.

Of all the evil that lives after men, there is nothing so harmful as an unjust will—it parts those who are joined in bonds of friendship, and even of love itself; it widens the fissure where they are already parted; and it lays the foundations of jealousy and hate for generations to come. In the present case, two men

who had not an idea in common, and whose natures were antagonistic in the extreme, were condemned by this dead man's ukase to dwell together for a year of their lives, and to share a common fortune for ever. It was felt by all who heard his mandates that Matthew Thurle had left mischief behind him ; and even the lawyer, looking from Richard's flushed and angry face to John's, so quiet and so pale, did not venture to address to either of the two co-heirs his customary phrase on such occasions : ' I congratulate you.'

The first person to speak was the deaf housekeeper.

' Has my master remembered his old servant, Mr. Linch ?' inquired she, in a quavering voice. ' I did not hear my name !'

The lawyer hesitated. It was a hard case, he knew, that this faithful creature,

who had borne with old Thurle's temper for more than a quarter of a century, and had helped him in his darling scheme for saving money, to her own discomfort, had not been mentioned in his last testament.

‘You are to have fifty pounds a year for life,’ said John Milbank, pitching his voice, as long habit had accustomed him to do, so as to reach the old woman's ear.

‘God bless him!’ she answered, with a sigh of relief, the picture of the parish workhouse probably becoming a dissolving view to her mental eyes. ‘I thought he would not forget me; and I hope he has not cut off Master Richard.’

This was hard on John, though he was accustomed to find his brother preferred before him by the entire female sex—as an object of pity, it is true, but also of admiration; but on this occasion at least

he had his compensation. The company had now risen, and Maggie advanced towards him with outstretched hand and said: 'I must thank you, John, upon my own account, for your generosity to Richard in urging him to be here to-day.'

His face flushed to the temples, and his hand shook as he took hers; but his voice was firm and quiet as usual as he replied: 'I only did my duty, Maggie, in carrying out my uncle's wishes.'

There was a certain primness, which his enemies called priggism, in all John said, even at his best.

Richard broke into a contemptuous laugh. 'Well, I think we have had enough of duty and our uncle to-day,' observed he scornfully.—'Mrs. Morden, this old curmudgeon has not left you a single farthing,' added he vehemently. 'The annuity John spoke of will be paid

you by him and me, so don't let us hear any more about your dear master ! '

‘ Yes, yes ; God bless him ! ’ answered the old lady, to whom only the last few words of Richard’s speech were intelligible. ‘ How he would have enjoyed the smell of them roses to-day. Wouldn’t he ? But that’s all over now. ’

Perhaps Richard would have made another attempt to undeceive her, had not Maggie interfered.

‘ If it pleases her to think her old master kinder than he was, why disturb her happy faith ? ’ said she.

‘ Yes, yes ; let her think what she likes, ’ added John persuasively.

Richard shrugged his shoulders. ‘ Since *you* wish it, Maggie, let it be so, ’ said he ; ‘ but for my part, ’ added he with significance, ‘ I hate humbug and hypocrisy of all description. ’

There was an unpleasant pause, broken at last by a suggestion from the lawyer, that Mrs. Morden should give up her keys to her young masters, that they might go over the house and explore their new possession. Whereupon, the little company, after a somewhat constrained farewell, took their departure, leaving the two young men alone at Rosebank.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CO-HEIRS.

‘WELL,’ said Richard, when the house-keeper, not without tears in her old eyes, had produced the keys, and withdrawn to her own apartment, ‘you know the cottage well enough, I suppose ; and as for me, though by no means so familiar with it, I have no curiosity about its contents, except in one respect—I should like to know what Uncle Matthew has left in his cellar.’

‘Just as you please,’ answered John quietly. ‘There is an inventory of everything except the wine.’

‘That is just like the old hunks: he took infinite pains about everything that a man of spirit despises; while all that makes life pleasant he deemed of no account.’

John looked as if about to speak, but did not do so.

‘What on earth are you at?’ inquired the other impatiently.

‘I am lighting a candle; the cellar is not lit from outside, you know.’

‘Bah! How those matches smell of brimstone! They remind me of where the old miser is gone himself! I should think he gave about a farthing a box for them. I’ll just smoke a cigar, to make the room sweet. Just hand me that spill.—Thank you. Gad! if he saw me now, smoking in his best parlour, it would give him another turn of the screw.’

With his hands thrust deep into his

pockets, and smoking his cigar, Richard followed his brother as he led the way with the candle.

‘ You had better be careful how you come down these steps,’ said John, when he had unlocked the cellar door, ‘ for they are very steep.’

‘ You are a fool to say so,’ laughed the other coarsely, ‘ since nothing could turn out better for you than that I should pitch down here head-first, and break my neck ! The place, as it is, looks uncommonly like a grave.’

There were two cellars—one contained in the house itself, and the other built out underground ; the walls of both were damp and mildewy, and on the bottles, particularly those in the outer compartment, the cobwebs were hanging in clusters. There was altogether an ample store of wine.

‘Well, I call this a prize!’ cried Richard, looking about him. ‘I will never again find fault with temperance and sobriety. The old fool must have become a teetotaler in his old age, surely. —I beg your pardon, though; I forgot that you had taken the pledge yourself. But you’ll break it now; won’t you? There’s some ’20 port here, if the seal tells true: I should think Father Mathew himself would absolve you for drinking *that*.’

‘My uncle drank very little of late years,’ remarked John coldly, without taking notice of the other’s personal allusion; ‘and what he did drink was only the lighter sorts.’

‘The *cheaper* sorts, you mean, my good sir! Well, it was very wise of him, because they don’t keep their body. At the same time, if he could have foreseen

what was going to happen, he would probably have treated himself to something better. There's very little champagne, I see ; we must look to that. But old Roberts will smack his lips over that port.—You know Roberts, of course, the banker that was.'

'I know who he *is*,' answered John quietly.

'Ah, but you shall know *him*—he's a man whose talk is worth hearing. There's Gresham, too, as sharp as a needle. And if it comes to singing songs, I don't know a man in England that I would back against Dennis Blake. There are merry days, my good fellow, in store for you at Rosebank, I promise you, and many a jolly bout will we have in this old parlour.'

They had left the cellar now, and were once more in the sitting-room ; the

weather had changed ; the rain was falling heavily without, and all the sky was overcast and gloomy.

‘ You will ask whom you please to Rosebank, of course, Richard,’ observed his brother, ‘ but I hope, while I am here, you will not invite Dennis Blake.’

‘ Not ask Dennis ! Why not ? He is the very prince of good fellows, and my most particular friend.’

‘ I am sorry to hear it. That is,’ added John, correcting himself, ‘ since he is your friend, I will say nothing against him ; but personally, he is very objectionable to me—I may even say offensive.’

‘ That is because you don’t understand him, my dear sir. You must know Denny intimately to appreciate him. The fact is, you have been consorting with little better than Quakers. I say nothing against them, because they are *your*

friends. But now there is no more necessity for such asceticism ; you have been wearing a hair shirt, but you may now indulge yourself with linen. You have not lost the *capacity* for enjoying yourself, I hope, through your long course of self-denial ? ’

‘ There has been no self-denial in my course of life, Richard,’ answered the other quietly. ‘ I have lived, so far as my habits go, as pleased myself.’

‘ And one other,’ returned Richard quickly. ‘ Come, don’t keep on at the old game, when there is no pool left to play for—when you have won the stakes. We are quite *alone*, you know, my good fellow, you and I.’

Richard’s air and tone were even more contemptuous than his words, yet a small red spot in the centre of his brother’s cheeks was all the fire they kindled.

‘ I know we are alone, Richard,’ answered he, ‘ and it is very wretched. Still, it is not my fault that it is so, but the misfortune of us both. Since it has pleased our uncle——’

Here Richard burst in with so vehement an execration that the other waited, as though it had been a clap of thunder, for it to pass away, ere he resumed :

‘ Since he has ordained that we should pass the next twelve months in each other’s company, why not endeavour to make the best of it? Why make me feel, in your every word and look, that my society is abhorrent to you? ’

‘ Because I can’t help it,’ was the coarse response. ‘ It is all very well for you, who are a saint, and can keep all your passions so dutifully under control that those who don’t know you as I do suppose you have none.’

Here the little red spot grew larger, and for a moment John Milbank looked towards his brother as Cain might have regarded Abel.

‘ You are very hard, Richard,’ said he ;
‘ you do not spare me.’

‘ No, by Heaven ! And I don’t intend to do so. I mean to make this house unpleasant for you in every way ; I tell you that. That is, if you refuse to listen to reason.’

‘ To reason ! ’ repeated John, in a tone the hopelessness of which made it unwittingly more contemptuous than any sneer.

‘ Oh yes, I can be reasonable enough when it suits me,’ continued Richard, ‘ though it mayn’t be your sort of reason. One may know on which side one’s bread is buttered, quite as well as another, though one may not sacrifice every

pleasure in life to the acquisition of a round of it. You have got your round, but I'll take precious good care you don't enjoy it. You think it's a fine thing to be left share and share alike with me at Rosebank; but I can tell you that I am going to be master here for all that. I'll have my friends here—Denny amongst them—every day in the week. We'll drink—— Hollo! what's that I read in your eye? This prospect seems to give you pleasure! "Give this fellow rope enough," you are saying to yourself, "and he will hang himself." You think old Herbert Thorne will object to such goings-on, and that before the year is out Maggie may cry off with me and on with somebody else. Ah, ha! I have found you out, sly fox!'

'Richard,' cried John suddenly, 'when you win at cards, is it not thought a cruel

thing to taunt and crow over the loser? You have at least the morality of the card-table, and to that I make an appeal. You are the winner, and I am the loser in—another matter. Is not that enough? Can you not be silent over your victory?’

‘That depends, my fine fellow. The sight of you, I confess, has not a conciliatory effect upon me. We are like two dogs, you see, whom the keeper has coupled together: one a staid, slow-going hound; the other, a rover; and the rover is the stronger one, and is likely to drag the other whither he will, or choke him. What we both want is to slip our collars; and it lies with you to do it.’

‘If you mean that it depends on me to alter my uncle’s will, Richard, you are mistaken. You heard its terms yourself.’

‘Its terms! As if I—or you, for the matter of that—cared a farthing about its

terms! You will be talking to me next, like Lawyer Linch, about “the wishes of the testator.” Is the habit of hypocrisy so easily lost, that it is necessary to be always keeping your hand in?’

‘I was merely referring to the facts of the case.’

‘And so am I. The facts of the case are, that Uncle Matthew wishes me to attend to the factory business; and I don’t mean to go near the place. He wishes me to imitate the example of your virtues, and to be edified by your conversation; whereas I despise the one, and shall not listen to the other. You will do all the work, and like it. The companion that I shall choose for myself is not you, but Dennis Blake, or some such another—certainly not a serious teetotaler like yourself. This will happen, my good sir, whether you will assent to it

or not; but if you choose to be reasonable, things may be made very pleasant for both of us.'

'I will make them as pleasant as I can, Richard.'

'That is well said. Now you are beginning to talk sense. What we are both endeavouring after is a divorce, you see, without the "Queen's proctor intervening." There must be no collusion that anybody can lay hold of; and at the same time we must get free. You shall have the business to yourself—without my even so much as looking into an account—and I will take, not half, but so much of the profits as you consider fair, since I shall be only a sleeping-partner.'

'You shall have half, Richard.'

'Well, to be sure, I want money more than you do; and it ought to be considered that my uncle would have made

me his heir, but for my own doings. Then one or other of us must leave Rosebank.'

'I would wish that as much as you, Richard; but it is impossible. If I left you here, I should be forfeiting every shilling of my uncle's bequest.'

'Then, *I'll* go. The money will then, it is true, revert to you by law; but you are a man of honour, and I'll trust you. Give me your word that it shall make no difference——'

'I would not trust myself to do such a thing, Richard,' interrupted the other hastily. 'I thank you for your confidence, but the temptation might be too powerful for me. I would not risk it.'

'Then give me your bond. I'll find a better lawyer than Linch, who will make me safe enough. Just imagine what a twelvemonth lies before us, and how we shall detest one another before it's over!'

‘That is true,’ murmured the other with a shudder.

‘Just so. Then why should you hesitate? We shall both be free, and each pursue that road in life which happens to be most attractive to us. You will extend the business—I will never ask for a farthing more than half the present profits of it—and become a merchant-prince in time, no doubt. You will have your little tea-fights and prayer-meetings here at Rosebank, and enjoy them, I hope, to your heart’s content.’

‘And you?’

‘Oh, I shall also become thoroughly domesticated, though not, perhaps, quite so much in the tame-cat line. I shall marry Maggie—privately, of course—at once, and live happily ever afterwards. After years of separation, you may feel a tenderness for your only brother; and

when you die, may bequeath ten thousand pounds apiece to each of your nephews and nieces. Who knows? Come; is it a bargain?’

‘No, Richard,’ answered the other positively; ‘it is impossible.’

‘Yet you thought it not impossible a minute ago; I’ll swear to it! Shall I tell you what caused you to alter your opinion? Your objection is only to the last part of the arrangement—that I should marry at once. It is extraordinary, considering your secretive habits, that you have no command over your countenance. I can read you like a book—of course, full of moralities. Don’t be a fool, John! If you think that Maggie will not wait a year for me, you are vastly mistaken. It was only yesterday that she undertook to marry me out of hand, and go to America, in case things

had turned out worse to-day for me than they have. As it is, they will have turned out bad for *you*, if you are obstinate. I ask you once more—are we to wear this galling chain or not?’

‘And I tell you once more, I have no power to break it, Richard!’

‘That is to say, you have no wish. Very good! The matter henceforth is dropped; and whatever happens, you have only yourself to blame for it.—And now, may I ask you, my good sir, in the character of partner, how am I to get some ready-money, of which I stand much in need? I suppose my cheques upon the firm will be honoured?’

‘In time, and within the limits specified by Uncle Matthew’s will, no doubt they will; but, as Mr. Linch will tell you——’

‘Bother Mr. Linch! I can’t wait

while the accounts are being looked into, if you mean that. My uncle left some money in the bank, did he not ?’

‘Yes ; eight hundred pounds was the exact sum, as you perhaps remember.’

Richard’s handsome face grew very dark, for he could not affect to misunderstand his brother’s allusion. To know that one is guilty of a baseness is very bitter ; to know that another knows it is still worse ; but the dregs of the gall are in the draught when that other reveals to you his knowledge. Richard hated John more than he had ever done, for those four words, ‘As you perhaps remember.’ Not a syllable, however, did he utter in rejoinder.

‘I want four hundred pounds,’ was all he said. ‘Can I have it at once ?’

‘Not out of our uncle’s bequest, as I should suppose, at present. But I have

about as much as that of my own, and I will advance it you.'

'Very good. I will give you my I O U.' And he sat down and wrote it accordingly, in return for his brother's cheque. Then crumpling the latter into his pocket, he lit a second cigar, and strode out of the house and into the pouring rain without a word.

His scheme had been to so foreshadow their mutual relations as to disgust his brother, and compel him to enter into some arrangement to evade the conditions of their uncle's will; but having failed, he bitterly resolved that the picture he had drawn of John's discomfort should be borne out to the uttermost by the reality.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WET BLANKET.

It is often objected to the good characters in works of fiction, that they are not made sufficiently 'interesting,' and that the cause of morality thereby suffers; and yet, after all, the novelist is in this particular only drawing from life itself. It was a complaint made by a great religious leader, in connection with the question of psalm-singing, that 'the de'il had all the best tunes;' and, in spite of some isolated efforts to prevent him, the devil still possesses them. The graces of good manners, of wit, and

above all, of 'naturalness,' are almost always conspicuous by their absence in those who call themselves religious persons. Their 'cheerfulness'—though we all agree it is highly commendable—is not attractive, since it often partakes of that character which is termed by the frivolous 'deadly lively.' It is not so easy to be all things to all men as an apostle might wish, and the attempt of the virtuous to win over the wicked by geniality is almost always a failure. Like the well-meant efforts of men of science to gild the pill of instruction, they fail even in the gilding. The orrery by which we are to be attracted towards the heavenly bodies is itself a melancholy object, and only amusing from the fact that it aspires to be so. So much is this the case, that a clergyman who happens to have a natural

turn for humour is generally looked on with some suspicion by his own cloth, and it is whispered: 'It is a pity he took orders.' And what is true in this respect of persons of earnest religious feeling, is still more so in the case of those of a rigid morality. They are not only unattractive to their fellow-creatures, but often even intolerable; which does not so much arise from their being virtuous while the rest of the world like cakes and ale, as from their want of sympathy, their reserve, and from those characteristics the possessor of which is apt to be described in brief as 'a wet blanket.'

'The Wet Blanket' was the name by which John Milbank was known in social circles at Hilton, as though he had been an Indian chief. He was undeniably handsome, and personal beauty

is itself a powerful social auxiliary even in a man; 'a good-looking fellow' has, in spite of Wilkes's saying, more than a quarter of an hour's start of an ugly one, even with those of his own sex. But this advantage was thrown away in John's case by the absence of the desire to please. In women, indeed, he excited a temporary interest; but when they found he was marble it soon died away, or crystallized into the sort of admiration with which one regards a statue. It could not be said of him that 'he taught in a Sunday school, and had not a vice,' because he did not teach in a Sunday school. The religious sect to which, in common with his late uncle, he belonged was proud of him, by reason of his growing importance, rather than from any gracious sign of piety in the young man: he would one day become a powerful

member of their church, since diligence, sobriety, and intelligence unfailingly lead to power; but they did not expect from him an enthusiastic support. He attended their prayer-meetings pretty regularly, but by no means so often as he might have done; and now and then he had a tendency to 'withstand the word'—that is, as Mr. Lynch preached it. In morals, too, he was not so much austere, which would have been creditable, as apparently unmoved by temptation—a circumstance which, by the fair sex, was naturally felt to be insulting. Even in the most respectable circles, it may be remarked that a man who 'doesn't care for ladies' society,' or is not 'impressionable,' is held in more disfavour than a rake. John Milbank was not a saint, in short, but quite as unpopular as though he had been one. On the other hand, he had some

fine qualities of a positive and active sort. He was as just as Aristides, and yet generous to a fault. For all his 'getting,' he never refused to give. His hand, as more and more was poured into it, remained open as ever, not only to the necessities of the poor, but even to more doubtful claimants. He had more than once assisted his brother with money to defray his extravagances ; toiled and tasked himself for months to procure funds for him, that had been wasted in a day. This, indeed, had not happened very lately, for the breach had been so wide between them, that Richard had not had the front of brass to apply to him for assistance ; but, as we have seen, John had made a generous effort to secure to his brother the half of that wealth which would else, as he had good reason to suppose, have accrued to himself alone ; nor

could anything have proved more incontestably the confidence which his uncle had reposed in his generosity of disposition, than the hint which he had given him of the contents of his testament. Even now, notwithstanding the ungraciousness with which his kindly warning had been received, he did not regret it, nor would he have done so, even if, through it alone, his brother had saved his inheritance. His sense of duty overbore all other considerations; and only less strong than that was his sense of the obligations of kinship. He could not love his brother; the text that assumes the knowledge of that relative as a reason for loving him had no application in the case; for it was his very acquaintance with Richard's character that prevented him from entertaining affection for him; but he thought himself bound to defend and

advance his interests for all that, even to his own hurt—save in one particular. He could not, and he would not, assist him to marry Maggie Thorne.

If you had opened John Milbank's heart, you would have found her name engraved on that true metal, more deeply than her father had ever cut into steel. No one had read it there, as he had flattered himself, until an hour ago, when Richard had taunted him with that fatal secret. He had never told his love, nor thought of telling it; it would have been of no use to do so, it was true, since Richard, his superior in every way in the eyes of womankind, had declared his intentions of winning Maggie; but still it was for Richard's sake that he had never so much as sighed for her; had buried her, as it were, in his heart, and sorrowed for her loss, as though—almost—she had

been really dead to him. It was that 'almost' which had of late become the fiery trial of John Milbank's life. There had been a temptation to him far beyond that of wealth—to keep the knowledge of his uncle's will from Richard, so that his marriage with Maggie should have been rendered impossible, through lack of means. He had put that from him, like a man—for few women in such a case would have exercised a similar self-denial—and had been in some degree rewarded for it. The marriage which poverty might, after all, have hastened in one so reckless as his brother, had been at least postponed. It afforded John no actual hope, indeed, but it was a reprieve from what would have been despair. On the other hand, Richard had discovered that he was his rival, and thereby possessed himself of a weapon against which he had

no defence, and the wounds of which were terrible ; and he had already shown that he would not spare to use it.

Gloomy as was the prospect of the next twelve months for John, it was not that which now weighed upon his mind, as he sat alone at quiet Rosebank—soon to be the scene of unwelcome revelry and riot. Discomfort and insolence he would have to bear, no doubt ; but it was not of himself that he was thinking, nor of the ordeal through which he was about to pass. He looked beyond that time, and shuddered at the fate that was awaiting Maggie. The heartless selfishness and brutal vice of Richard Milbank were revealed to him as they had never been before, and it was Maggie who would be their helpless victim. He did not believe that any conduct of this man, in the meantime, however gross, would alienate

her affections from him, though he could not refrain from speculating upon the possibility of such an occurrence. Richard had bewitched her from the first, and had retained her love without an effort on his part; nay, notwithstanding that he had been remiss in his attentions to her, and notoriously given up to vice and folly. He had been faithless to her, too, John knew, though Maggie probably did not; and that reflection was accompanied by another. Should he let her know it? It would be a base thing to do, in one sense; but if nothing short of having her eyes opened to the depravity of this man could save her from life-long wretchedness, would it not be justifiable? Perhaps. Yet if *he*, John, were to be the cause of her enlightenment, would it be to save her from Richard, or to recommend to her himself? A question not to

be satisfactorily answered; and, moreover, he could never recommend himself to her that way. No; nor, as it seemed, in any way. Maggie had never liked him—had never spoken a really pleasant word to him until that afternoon, and then it had only been to thank him for his generosity to Richard. It had been delicious to him to see her smile, to hear her gracious words, to take her little hand, and feel it press his own; but it had also been wormwood; for did not her very gratitude imply that she and Richard were already one, or as good as one! No; if Richard were dead, he should be no nearer to possessing her, since she had evidently an antipathy to him. (He was wrong here: Maggie had no antipathy to him, though little sympathy with his character—which she nevertheless secretly respected and ad-

mired ; but she resented his virtues, the possession of which seemed a reproach to his brother, and especially the praise of them by others.) How cruel and unjust it seemed ! All his heart was hers ; all his thoughts were for her. To work for her would have been the greatest bliss his imagination could conceive. Yet all this devotion weighed as nothing against a few passionate glances from Richard's eyes, a few careless vows from Richard's lips !

What was it that his brother possessed, and he did not, which, notwithstanding the former's follies, made him everywhere the favourite with all women, and with nine-tenths of their male acquaintance, including even so business-loving and sedate a personage as had been their Uncle Matthew ? Poor John even went the length of looking at himself in the

little pier-glass, as though some explanation of the phenomenon might be discovered *there*. And, indeed, in the rueful countenance which now confronted him—so seldom regarded by himself that it was quite a novel study—he did seem to recognize some of his social defects. It was not, he owned, as a young man's face should be; there were lines about it that looked like the autograph of Time himself; the forehead was not smooth; and the muscles about the mouth were hard and set, not mobile, as in those who are given to smile. ‘She thinks me a dull dog, no doubt,’ sighed he; ‘well, at least she shall have no cause to call me a surly one.’

Did all his bitterness, and murmuring against the hardness of his fate result, then, but in resignation? Did he intend to submit patiently to all indignities that

might be put upon him, well content if he should secure an acknowledgment of his forbearance from Maggie's lips? Or did he entertain a hope that before the year was out something might happen yet to reward him for years of silent but supreme devotion; that her love for Richard might wane through his own reckless ill-doing; and that her pity for himself might grow to love, or at least to the toleration which he was willing to accept in its stead? It is a question that at present cannot be answered, since, if he had that day been asked it, John Milbank could not have answered it himself.

CHAPTER VIII.

FORGIVEN.

THOUGH not usually what is called 'a man of his word,' Richard Milbank kept it as respected his proceedings at Rosebank to the letter. He assembled there the jovial spirits of whom he had spoken to John so eulogistically, and showed him 'life,' in what he well knew would prove to be a very unattractive form. Hitherto, the two brothers had lived almost wholly apart—the elder occupying 'apartments' in the more fashionable part of the town; and John, in lodgings near the factory. They had had few

acquaintances in common, and those who were now Richard's most frequent guests at the cottage were not among them. John had indeed met Dennis Blake, just after it had become pretty well known that his brother was paying court to Maggie; and something that 'Denny' had said to him regarding that young woman—by no means intended to be disagreeable, but spoken out of the fulness of the young gentleman's—well—animal spirits, had offended him mortally. He had received the remark with nothing beyond a cold disapproval, that had caused Mr. Blake to say of him that 'it was easy to see he was not of the right sort;' but, as a matter of fact, he had been within an inch or so of taking his brother's ally by his bull neck and shaking the life out of him. It was very unreasonable in him to be even annoyed—

as those friends to whom Mr. Blake confided the matter (which he did as a good joke) were all agreed—since, after all, Maggie Thorne was not his sister-in-law yet, and surely one may talk of any young woman to one's fellow-man—she not being related to him by either blood or marriage—with vivacity and freedom. ‘Indeed, for all I care,’ said Denny, in his simplicity and candour, ‘he may tell Dick himself.’

But Dick had never known, and never did know, why, of all his dissolute companions, Dennis Blake was especially obnoxious to his brother; he only knew that he *was* so, and asked him all the more frequently to Rosebank on that account. They were great friends again, those two, now that the card debt between them was settled; and the little parlour at the cottage had become

the scene of even more considerable 'operations' than those which had been carried on at the *Sans Souci*. Often and often when John came back to what was now his home he found a quiet little company sitting up to their knees in cards—for those against whom luck was running insisted upon new packs, not the less, perhaps, since they were supplied to them for nothing—and with the table covered with gold and notes, as though it had been that of a money-changer. If it was a spectacle, as Mrs. Morden said it was, to 'make the old master turn in his grave,' he must have made a good many such revolutions.

John himself was not, as may be imagined, received by these gentry with enthusiasm; indeed, they were much too occupied with their gains and losses to pay great attention to his arrival; but,

either to show that he had a right to be there, or in order to obey the letter of his uncle's will (since to comply with its spirit was out of the question), he seldom let a day pass without giving his brother the opportunity of speech with him. At first he had even dined in his company, accommodating his own early hours to suit Richard's more fashionable habits; but as there were always guests at table whose presence was more or less unwelcome to him, and some of whom did not hesitate to show that they reciprocated this want of sympathy, he had discontinued the custom. He would come home late—or what was late for him—and, after looking in upon the card-party for a few minutes, would retire to his chamber—not always, however, to rest; for though the company were sedate and serious enough before supper, they were wont

after that meal to grow so uproarious that the deaf old housekeeper would awake from slumber with the utterly false impression that she was in Little Bethel Chapel, and that Mr. Linch had just given out the hymn. It was complained by some members of the *Sans Souci* that there was now quite a difficulty in getting up a rubber there, since all the choicer spirits—which meant those most devoted to high play—were drawn away from it by the superior attractions of Rosebank. Nor, it was whispered, was it only whist that was played there, but unhallowed games—such as loo, and even brag. ‘And mark my words,’ said Colonel Hardhead—who had made a sort of professional income out of the more scientific amusement of about three hundred pounds for the last twenty years—‘there will be a row at that man Milbank’s. No young

fellow can hurt himself, to speak of, at short whist,' this military moralist went on to say; 'but when it comes to gambling games, there is no telling what he mayn't lose.' Nor was gambling, unhappily, the only vice that was now practised in what Miss Lynch, the lawyer's sister—an ancient, but still very marriageable maiden, who had paid delicate attentions, indeed so delicate that he had never so much as observed them, to Mr. Matthew Thurle for the last quarter of a century—had been wont poetically to term 'the Rose Bower.' The '20 port, the long untouched bin of brown sherry, were, to use their new proprietor's own phrase, 'punished very severely'; and people who inflict that sort of chastisement—like a loving father who corrects his child—often suffer for it in their own persons.

Drink had always been one of Richard's weaknesses, and, now that he could indulge it without stint, it was gaining the mastery over him with rapid strides. He drank when he was winning, for very joy; he drank when he was losing, to keep up his spirits; and when he was neither winning nor losing, which was about half his time, he drank because he felt the need of a stimulant. The only approach to regularity and system which his character exhibited, was in keeping his 'cellar book' in a most methodical manner, and entering in it every bottle that was withdrawn from that fast-failing treasure-cave. In the middle of a debauch, he would leave his companions, and, with some social platitude about 'every man being his own butler,' would stagger down to the bins, bring up more wine himself, and set it down in his book 'before he forgot it.'

‘You keep that book, I suppose, by “double entry,” Dick,’ said Mr. Roberts, on an occasion when this young Apollo was looking more than usually like Silenus.

Nor was it only in the presence of his boon companions that Richard thus disgraced himself. As time went on—the time in which he called himself ‘his own master,’ but which was making him more and more a slave—indulgence in this respect had grown so much a habit with him, that he could not shake it off even when he would have done so. And on one occasion, when, for once, a joint invitation from the two brothers had brought Mr. Linch and his sister, with Mr. Thorne and Maggie, to dine at Rosebank, Richard’s behaviour at his own table was what even simple Miss Linch could not forbear to hint at to Maggie in the drawing-room as ‘very peculiar.’ What

Maggie thought of it was not stated; but what the gentlemen guests thought of it may be gathered from the fact that they had taken both the ladies home, without giving them the opportunity of making a cup of tea—which might have done him good—for the master of the house. The person who suffered most upon that painful occasion was John Milbank, because he most clearly understood what Maggie was suffering, and was absolutely unable, from the nature of the case, to conceal that he did so. If he had had time to consider the affair, perhaps he might have found cause for selfish congratulation; but in the meantime he was too much pained to enter into such reflections, and besides, was fully occupied by his attempts to smooth matters.

When Herbert Thorne and his daughter got home that night, the former made

one more effort—the first since Richard had come into his property, nine months ago—to remonstrate with Maggie upon her engagement.

‘You see, what I told you would happen has come to pass, Maggie,’ observed he bluntly: ‘Richard Milbank has become a sot.’

‘Father, this is your house,’ answered the girl, at the same time rising from her chair, ‘and you have, of course, the right to say in it what you please; but I will not stay here if you speak such words of Richard!’

She spoke in desperate earnest, and even moved towards the shawl and bonnet which she had just laid aside upon the table. It was evidently no use to *drive* her from the path that she had chosen. That would only hurry her over the precipice round which she ran.

‘I do not wish to use hard words, Maggie, and certainly not words to pain you; but what is to be thought of Richard Milbank’s behaviour to you, to me, to all of us, at his own table to-day? Is it possible that you could not see he was intoxicated?’

‘I did see that!’ She had seen it long before the old man had done so; the sense of it had reached her heart, and chilled it, alas! without numbing it to pain, before the suspicion of it had dawned in her father’s brain. ‘It was shocking and most sad; but then he knows that you look unfavourably upon him, and that Mr. Linch is not his friend; and that puts him ill at ease. I think he took the wine in order to give him vivacity. I don’t defend him, but I think there was some excuse. I am sure his brother thought that, by the way he took it.’

‘John is his good angel, of course, if only Richard would let him be so; but he will not. His example and advice are utterly thrown away upon him. He strove to enrich him at his own expense, and the return which he has got for it is, that this fellow has already half ruined him.’

‘Half ruined John? How can that be?’

‘First, by borrowing money of him, which he has not repaid, and never can repay; then, by drawing out every shilling he can lay his hands upon from the business, so that it is almost crippled. Of course, you did not know this; nor should I have done so, if I had waited for John to tell me. He is one of those who never complain. But it is none the less true, for all that. I doubt, Maggie, whether Richard Milbank is any the better off at

this moment, if everything was to be made square, than before his uncle's death.'

'He is no worse off, at all events, father, than when I promised to marry him,' was the quiet reply.

'Worse off! As to money, perhaps not. But is he no worse? Maggie, darling, look into your heart, and tell me truthfully, have you any genuine confidence in this man? Do you think that, though the patience and long-suffering of his brother have been utterly thrown away upon him, you may yet win him from ruin, as his wife? Is there any reasonable expectation of it? Nay, is there even hope?'

Maggie answered not a word, nor even looked up at her father, but sat with her fingers plucking at a little bouquet of roses, which Richard had gathered her

from the garden before they had sat down to table.

‘You know, my girl, that I am but speaking the bare truth when I say that the gulf of ruin gapes for you, and that the branch by which you trust to save yourself from it, though green and pleasant to the eye, is rotten and worthless. Are you bewitched by this handsome scoundrel? Has he fascinated you, as the snake fascinates the poor innocent bird, merely with his bright eyes? If you were not my daughter, I should say that the father of such a girl must needs be ashamed of her.’

Into her pale cheeks there stole a scarlet flush, as though one of the rose petals she was stripping from their stem and strewing on the ground had settled there; but her voice was very quiet as she replied: ‘Speak of *me* as you please,

father, and whatever you speak of me, I will not even say that I have not deserved it. Perhaps I *am* bewitched. I have nothing to answer in Richard's defence, nor in my own, except three words : I love him !'

'You are easily satisfied, Maggie. If your mother had given the same reason for choosing me for a husband, she would at least have added: "And *he* loves *me*."'

'Richard *does* love me, father !' answered Maggie vehemently. 'If you were to paint him ever so darkly, and then convince me that the portrait was a correct one, I should still be sure of *that*.'

'Then love is not what love was in my time, lass !' sighed the old man, with the air of one who is weary of contention. 'Why, the man never comes to see you ; or, at least, I could count on my fingers the times that he has been here since his

uncle left him his co-heir. He must be sure of you indeed, Maggie, since he takes such little pains to keep what he has so lightly won.'

Nothing more that night was spoken between the father and daughter upon the matter; for, indeed, each had said all they had to say; but, as sometimes happens in arguments, the arrow that had been shot with the least care had gone nighest home. The Parthian shaft which the engraver had let fly at a venture when all seemed over, and he was indeed in full retreat, had almost turned the fortune of the battle. Maggie could have resisted anything in the way of depreciation of her lover, simply by intrenching herself behind the rampart of unbelief; but the suggestion that Richard was neglecting her was insupportable, since she had her own suspicions that it was true.

The very next morning, however, as it happened, Richard made his appearance at the engraver's house, not to excuse his conduct of the previous evening, nor even to extenuate it, he said, but to throw himself—as he confessed he had often done before — on his darling's mercy; a course of conduct which not only reinstated him in her good graces, but probably placed him higher therein than he would have been had he never fallen. He spent the whole morning in her company — not without stealing a furtive look or two at his watch, however — and seemed to take a greater interest in her occupations and pursuits than he had ever done before. As to the state of his affairs, concerning which she put some straightforward questions—without, however, any tincture of reproach—he told her very frankly that they were far

from flourishing, and that when the year was out he might again propose to her to share his fortunes across the Atlantic.

‘You once spoke to me of “a fresh start,” Maggie, in a new country,’ said he, with a penitent sigh, ‘and I have often wished that fortune—though it seemed to be a good fortune—had not interfered to prevent my trying it. I doubt we shall have to try it, after all.’

‘So much the better, darling,’ answered she resolutely. ‘Removed from these terrible temptations, which in your wiser moments you regret so much, you will then be a happier man. You smile, Richard, but it is not with your old smile! O surely, surely, you will not regret them!’

‘I was not thinking of them at all, Maggie,’ whispered the young man; ‘I was only regretting the time lost which

we might have spent together, since I might have called you mine six months ago.'

Richard Milbank may have been dull at figures; but for skill in getting his somewhat cooked accounts passed by an auditress in the High Court of Love he had few superiors.

CHAPTER IX.

THE THREE MONTHS' BILL.

LATE one afternoon, when John Milbank was closing his desk at the office, the day's work being done, word was brought that a stranger wished to see him. 'Show him up,' said John mechanically. He was not so eager to do business as he had been; first, because his mind was engrossed with another matter (in two months, or less, Maggie would be lost to him for ever; for it was not likely that Richard would delay his marriage one day beyond the limit imposed by his uncle's will); secondly, because while

his brother remained his partner, a continuous drain upon the resources of the firm, it was hopeless to push its interests.

There entered to him a man with a gray head and beard, but thickly built, and with no trace of age in his gait or bearing. His dark and piercing eyes had a furtive look, and in a tone which was not altogether unfamiliar to John, he asked to have a few words with him in private.

John was not suspicious, and fear was unknown to him; still, it was a comfort to reflect that a large sum of money which had been in the office strong-box that morning was now lying safe at the banker's. It was not business gains—far from it: he had just disposed of the proceeds of a certain property at a dead loss, and which his brother's expenditure had compelled him to realize.

‘We are quite private here, sir, and you need not fear interruption,’ was his quiet reply.

‘I am not a man of business,’ observed the stranger, ‘and therefore you must forgive me if I am out of order in what I am about to ask you. It may be an impertinence, in which case the personal interest I have in the question must plead my excuse.’

Where was it that John had heard this specious yet unconvincing tongue before? a tongue that seemed to require schooling to be decent, and to have had infinite pains taken with it, in the way of butter, to smooth off its rough edge.

‘I am not easily offended, sir,’ said John, eyeing his visitor very narrowly, ‘where, at least, no offence is meant.’

‘Then may I ask you, whether you have a certain bill out—a bill for a

thousand pounds at three months' date from yesterday ?'

John was like a rock as to his limbs, but he felt his heart fail within him. He knew of no such bill, but it was possible that his reckless brother might have drawn it on the house without his knowledge. If it was so, and he should honour it, the sacrifice he had just made for the sake of ready-money, for the carrying on of his trade, would go for nothing. If he did not honour it, disgrace would befall Richard, and alas, on her who would then be one with him, before their honeymoon was over. Their honeymoon? Why had he not consented to Richard's proposal at first, and let them marry? The agony that he now endured would have then been over long ago, the wound in his heart might have even cicatrized, and he would have been spared these many

months of meagre hope, that were now flickering out to leave him in black despair. Moreover, he would have escaped the material losses which Richard's conduct (and his own thankless leniency) had brought upon him, and which, if the man spoke truth, were now about to culminate in what was almost ruin.

'A bill at three months, for a thousand pounds,' said John quietly. 'We may have such a bill out; but I should not gratify the curiosity of a stranger——'

'*May* have? Why, the bill is accepted by yourself!' broke in the other coarsely.

'I know him now,' whispered John to himself. 'There is some devil's work afoot, then.' Though the sweat was on his brow his face was calm; his heart, though sick and weary, was resolute: whoever's foot should be placed upon his

neck, he swore it should not be this man's foot.

‘Let me look at the bill,’ said he quietly.

‘Look at it, sir? What for? You have not so many thousand-pound bills out, I conclude, as not to be able to say “Yes” or “No” to my first question! Look at it? Well, so you shall; but not too close! I am not going to risk your snatching it out of my hand and throwing it into the fire!’

In his utter contempt and loathing of this man, John Milbank smiled. ‘What dull villains must such wretches be, to suppose honest men are like themselves,’ thought he.

‘Why, you don’t mean to say it’s all right?’ cried his visitor, encouraged by John’s quiet, which contrasted strangely with his own vehemence and indignation.

‘ When a man has given money down for a thing like this——’

‘ Did *you* give money down, sir ? ’

‘ Well, yes, I did; some money. There was value received, if you mean that. And if he’d tricked me—if this, I say, was waste-paper, well, I’d hang him ! By Heaven, I would ! ’

‘ Whom would you hang ? ’

‘ Never mind who ; the dog who gave it me. His name is not here ; this is your name. You know your handwriting, I suppose.’ He held a slip of paper out at arm’s-length, which John regarded attentively. ‘ *John Milbank* : that is plain enough, sir,’ he continued. ‘ Is that worth a thousand pounds or not ? ’

‘ It is certainly not worth a thousand pounds.’

‘ Then your brother shall lodge in jail to-night, as sure as his name is Richard.’

‘Or as yours is Dennis Blake.’

‘Well, what if it is? I came here thus disguised not for my own sake.’

‘Of course not: it was for the sake of the money. If you found the bill all right, you would have gone away without your dear friend knowing that you had entertained the least suspicion of him. As it happens, you have made a slight mistake. The handwriting is my own.’

‘Then how can the bill be valueless? You don’t mean to tell me that you are stumped out—bankrupt? The unprincipled villain! And he has got two hundred pounds of mine, unless he has lost it this afternoon. He shall disgorge it, or——’

‘One moment, Mr. Blake,’ for the visitor had snatched up his hat, and was already at the door. ‘Business is not conducted quite so quickly as a game at

short-whist. You jumped too much at conclusions. I never said the bill was worth nothing; I only said it was not worth a thousand pounds. You will discover that yourself when you try to discount it. The bank is shut for to-day; but I will give you a cheque for the same money as it would fetch, if you want to get rid of the bill.'

'I very much want to get rid of it,' answered Blake frankly. 'I am all for ready-money transactions. It was only because your brother was my friend, you see——'

'I quite see, Mr. Blake,' interrupted John frigidly. 'You would make, I am sure, any sacrifice to friendship.'

'Well, I would go as far as most, that I will say. But when your brother said: "Now, that bill must not be presented till it comes due," and I knew that in a

month or two he might be across seas with his young woman, that, of course, rather aroused my suspicions. But since you have chosen to settle the matter yourself, there can be no harm in that; can there? I have not broken my word to him, I mean, or behaved otherwise than as a man of honour.'

'As regards that, I am no judge, sir,' answered John. 'To me, this matter is a mere business transaction.'

'Just so, with no obligation on either side. And Richard need know nothing about it, need he? Good afternoon, Mr. Milbank, and thank you.'

'You have no more bills of mine about you, I suppose?' inquired John imperturbably.

'No, indeed; not at present, that is. Gad! I wish I had! Good afternoon, sir.'

And John was left alone, with the bill in his hand. It was growing dark by this time, and he lit the gas, and held the document against the light. It was an ordinary three months' bill, drawn by Richard, and accepted by himself, and, to all appearance, in his own handwriting: nobody but himself could have detected that it was a forgery. Nor, indeed, could he have detected it, save that he knew he had never signed it. To gain possession of that paper had cost him near a thousand pounds, which he could ill spare, and yet his eyes flashed with pleasure, and his face flushed with triumph, as he looked at it.

‘He shall not have her now!’ cried he; ‘I will send him to jail rather with my own hands.’

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST FAREWELL.

RICHARD had no guests at Rosebank that night, but was roistering elsewhere, and, as usual, did not return until the small-hours. What was not so usual was, that he came home quite sober, and when he saw his brother in the parlour sitting up for him, he turned suddenly grave.

‘What! not abed yet, John?’ said he, astonished; then falling into his ordinary mocking style, ‘or is it that you have taken to rise an hour earlier? We have long ceased to eat with one another, and now it seems one must be up and about while the other sleeps.’

‘I have not been to bed, Richard; I have been waiting here these many hours to speak with you.’

‘That’s a pity; if you had sent to old Roberts’s, you would have found me any time since dinner. I wish to Heaven you had.’

‘You have lost your two hundred pounds, then, I conclude?’

‘What two hundred pounds?’ stammered Richard, setting down the candle he had been about to light, and sinking into a chair. The gas shone full upon his face, and John noticed, for the first time, how much it had lost of health as well as beauty. It could not be said of Richard that he had been no one’s enemy but his own; but he had been his own enemy, and would one day slay himself, that was certain. What a beautiful boy he had been! How generous, after his

lavish fashion, and when he himself had had all he needed; and how their dead mother had loved him! Young as John was when she died—a year younger than Richard—such was her confidence in the one, such was her love for the other, that it was to the younger's care that she had commended the elder. 'You have the sense and the prudence, John; and when the time comes to help poor Dick, think of me,' she had said, 'and do it.'

It was ten years ago since they had been uttered, yet he remembered his mother's words as though they had been spoken yesterday, and saw her once more, thin and gray, but still very comely, with her wasted hand—through which the sun seemed to shine—lying lovingly in his own. She was the only woman who had ever loved him, and even she had preferred his brother; but he was used even then to that.

‘The two hundred pounds that Blake gave you in exchange for that forged bill, I mean,’ said John, not menacingly, but in a grave accusing tone.

‘It is a lie,’ said Richard sullenly.

‘What is a lie? That Blake gave you so much back out of a thousand pounds? As for the bill, I have seen it with my own eyes.’

Richard groaned, and his face fell forward into his hands upon the table, as though a bullet had pierced him.

‘Listen to me, Richard. Hours ago, when this thing was first shown to me, I felt very hard towards you. This evil deed was but the climax of a series of ill turns that you had done me, not one of which I had provoked. I have given up everything to you that you have asked, and more; I have stripped myself bare to supply you, not with necessities, but

with superfluities of all kinds. This last act of yours went nigh to ruin me, as indeed it still does. A great temptation seized upon me; never mind what. I have had many hours of thought since, and it is over now. Only, you shall not stay here—in England. You must go.'

'Must is a hard word, brother!' said Richard, looking up with a fierce scowl.

'The time has gone by for soft ones, Richard.' His voice trembled, but not with tenderness. It had suddenly, and for the first time, struck him that, by avowing to Blake that he had put his own name to the bill, he had placed it out of his power to proclaim it a forgery. Should Richard discover this, he would really have no hold upon him at all. How foolish had he been to buy back that piece of paper, since only while it

remained in its late owner's hands could it be held over Richard *in terrorem* !

‘And suppose I said I would not budge, Brother John; what would you do then?’

‘Do not ask me. You know what I *could* do. Or, rather, let me say what Dennis Blake—your bosom friend—could do, ay, and *would*—for he told me so, in case he should discover you had forged my name.’

‘And has he discovered it?’ inquired Richard quickly.

‘Not yet. It lies with me whether he will do that or not.’

‘I see. He came to you—the scoundrel!—to find that out, and you gave him some evasive answer. He suspects already, in fact, that I forged the bill, but believes that you will buy it of him, and hush up the matter.’

‘Yes, for the present it is worth his

while to be silent. But if the bare suspicion makes him furious, you may judge what his wrath would be, what sort of mercy you may expect from him, if it should be realized.'

John could hardly believe his ears, when here Richard burst out into loud laughter. 'Denny would be pretty mad, that's true ; he don't like to lose money at any time, not even what has been other people's, and some of this was *lent* money. I have often thought how long his face would have looked this day three months, when he found that bill waste-paper and Richard Milbank over the seas !'

John stood regarding him with an expression of wonder, pity, and even terror. 'Can this be our mother's son ? Thank Heaven, she did not live to see him thus !' was what he was thinking.

‘It was a scurvy trick, I own,’ continued the other, as if in answer to this look; ‘but Denny is a scurvy fellow. I have lost a fortune to him at one thing and another, and he has been always hard upon me, and always ready with his “But I have lost to others, Dick,” as an excuse for being hard; though he does lose heavily too, sometimes, I am glad to say. You see I didn’t mean to take *you* in, John, but only him. You would have been none the worse, since, of course, when the bill came due, it would have been dishonoured.’

‘The bill!’ exclaimed John in agony. ‘Do you think only of the bill?’

‘Well, I thought that would be your own way of looking at it, being a man of business,’ was the other’s cool reply. ‘As for *my* dishonour, I should have been too far away by that time for any one in Hilton to see me blush.’

‘I pray you, say no more, Richard. I will pay this thousand pounds, upon condition that you leave this place at once—to-morrow. It will almost ruin me. You are like one who, passing by the work of some toilsome insect, brushes down with wilful foot, in a single instant, what has cost it months of labour to erect.’

‘Well, I say again that I didn’t mean to hurt *you*,’ returned Richard doggedly. ‘I’ll leave the country, of course, since you insist upon it; but you must give a fellow a little time—and a little money.’

‘Money; yes,’ returned John; ‘I have still a hundred pounds——’

‘Beyond the thousand?’ interrupted Richard practically.

‘Yes; I sold out all I had but yesterday, and you shall have it to the

last shilling. But as to time, I will not give you a day, not an hour! ('If he should see Blake,' thought John, 'and learn that I have bought the bill—that the danger is over—this millstone will be about my neck for ever. He must depart at once.')

'That is sharp work, Brother John; remember, there is Maggie.'

As if he did not remember; as if that had not been the temptation against which he had been battling for the last eight hours in the solitary night! Should he forbid him to take Maggie with him, to marry her at all, on pain of being proclaimed a felon? Or should he permit him to escape with her?—the richest prize that the best of men could win.

'I have thought of that, Richard,' said he, with icy calm. 'She shall

follow you to some other town, with her father; and after having become your wife, you shall take her with you beyond seas. But if you have a grain of feeling left, have compassion upon her, brother. Let this be the last of your evil deeds. Do not drag her down with yourself into the gulf of shame and ruin. You talked just now of having escaped beyond the reach of dishonour; *you* might have done so, but not she; and she would have withered at the touch of it. Imagine what Maggie Thorne would have felt, had she learned, though it were ten thousand leagues from hence, that she was the wife of a felon—of a forger!’

He spoke with uncommon vehemence, and yet with a tender entreaty in his tone that was inexpressibly touching. He had given up all he had

of worldly goods to benefit this man, but that was nothing in his eyes to what he was giving him now: not that it was his own to give, but still it was what his heart clung to, as a mother to her babe; and he was renouncing such claim to it as he had in favour of this good-for-naught, and with it all his cherished hopes and dreams of happiness.

‘Maggie ought to be greatly beholden to you,’ was Richard’s chilling reply. ‘I daresay I shall not be a husband worthy of her; not such a model of propriety as you would have been, for instance, if her fancy had chimed with yours; but as to this particular peccadillo of the bill, it would be very unreasonable in her to reproach me with it, since, in point of fact, it was she that did it.’

‘She that did it!’ John leaped from

his chair, and uttered the first oath that had ever escaped his lips. ‘*She* forge that bill, and bring disgrace upon yourself, and her, and me, and on her father! Oh shameless liar!’

‘I said nothing about “bringing disgrace,”’ was the sullen reply. ‘She knew nothing of that, of course, nor, indeed, of what she was doing.’

‘Go on,’ said John, in a hoarse voice, and gripping the table with both his hands. ‘How was it?’

‘Well, it was very simple. I made up my mind to do the trick, and took the bill to her one morning. We talked of this and that, and presently I brought the subject up of her own accomplishments: her drawing, painting, writing—she can copy anything, you know, as like as life.’

‘I know!’ groaned John.

‘Well, then, to please me, she began to

imitate the handwriting of her friends: old Linch's and his wife's; her father's; yours—and when she came to yours, I said: “Let's puzzle John,” and out I slipped the bill, and she signed *that*, without even asking what it was.’

‘Richard, I'll hang you!’

‘Hands off!’ cried Richard, for John had seized him by the collar, ‘or I *shall* hang for taking your life! Are you mad? Hands off! I say.’

‘If you leave the house without having copied the letter I have drawn up here,’ cried John, almost inarticulate with rage, ‘it shall be to go to jail; I swear it!’

‘What letter?’

‘This!’ He pushed a sheet of ordinary note-paper before him, with trembling hands. ‘You undertake, for a certain sum of money—all I have—to leave this town to-morrow, and England in a

month. To spare you—for I thought to spare you *then*—I have written nothing about the bill. You are going of your own free-will, you say, to seek your fortune elsewhere. I find this on my table in the morning, by way of farewell.'

'Pooh, pooh; you need not put yourself in such a fury. I had agreed to that before.'

'Not all of it. You will now depart *alone*.'

'What! without Maggie? Never!'

'We shall see. To-morrow you will spend in jail; and when the assizes come you will be tried, and sentenced to twenty years of penal servitude, which will all be passed without Maggie.'

'Jack, you dare not do it! What! not buy the bill up when you have the money, and your brother's fate depends upon it? And then to let it all come

out in court that Maggie forged the bill !
You dare not do it, John, for her sake !’

‘ By Heaven, I dare, though ; and I will ! What is one day’s torture, or a week’s, to the whole lifetime of disgrace and misery that she must needs endure with you ! Is any hope of reformation left in one who can make a cat’s-paw of the woman he loves, can cause her innocent hand to do his wicked work ! No ; vile and heartless traitor, you would be her ruin ! Sit down, and write, I say ! Beneath this very roof, you once compelled a sick and dying man to write for *you* ; now write for *me*, or rot in prison !’

Richard took the pen, overmastered quite by the other’s vehement resolve. For the present at least he felt that he was beaten ; put under foot by the man on whom he had himself so often trodden. How he hated John, and Dennis Blake,

and even Maggie herself, now that he was not to have her for his own! 'Well,' said he sullenly, 'I have written it.'

John took the paper, examined it carefully, then placed it in his pocket-book. 'And now,' said he, 'take this cheque, almost the last shilling that I have to draw, and the last you will ever see of mine. It is on our London bank, so that there is no need to wait at Hilton to cash it. Pack up to-night: take all you please; but leave this house at dawn, and never let me see your handsome, hateful face again—you——' he looked at him for a moment with unutterable scorn and loathing, then added—'you jail-bird!'

'A pretty farewell to your own flesh and blood,' remarked Richard grimly.

'You are not my flesh and blood, nor any man's,' answered John, turning

fiercely round with his hand upon the door. ‘The villain who would make a thief of an innocent girl whom he pretends to love, it were flattery to call a man! I say again, “jail-bird!”’ And with that he closed the door behind him; and so they parted.

Richard did not go upstairs, but, after a moment’s thought, snatched up his hat, and, late as it was, left the house and started at a quick pace towards the town.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT THE SERVANTS THOUGHT OF IT.

JOHN MILBANK was one of those men who rise in the morning with the regularity of clock-work, but on the day after his parting with his brother, he was purposely a few minutes late. He was in hopes that Mrs. Morden, who, although she had 'assistance' in the kitchen, always dusted out the parlour herself, would find the open letter that Richard had left behind him, on the table, and bring it upstairs. But the housekeeper belonged to that fast expiring race of domestic servants who do not read their masters' letters, no

matter how eligible may be the opportunity. She had seen it, indeed, but had simply removed it to the mantelpiece, in order that she might lay the table for breakfast. So John had to come down unsummoned, and discover the document for himself. Then he rang the bell, and, with a very grave face, put the note into Mrs. Morden's hand, since to have made her understand its contents by word of mouth would have been also to state them to the parish.

‘Oh, the poor dear!’ exclaimed she, and wringing her hands, fled instantly up to Richard's room. ‘He is gone, Master John, he's gone!’ cried she, from the top of the stairs. ‘Oh, do'ee come and look. He has never been anigh his bed. And yet—thank Heaven for it—he has left his brushes, and scents, and all: he would never have gone away for good without

his brushes.' This remark was a sagacious one, and showed that, within a limited range, Mrs. Morden was an observer of human nature. Richard was not a dandy; but he was scrupulous about his personal appearance, and especially careful of his bright, soft, curling hair.

'He says in the letter,' observed John referring to it, 'that when I read it he will be far away from Hilton, and never means to return to it again.'

'I know he does: but he can't mean it. There's his portmantel just as it was, and even his carpet-bag. Does that look as though he had really meant to leave home? And not a word of good-bye to me, as loved him from a child. Lord, I can see him now, in his velvet frock tied with red ribbons at the sleeves, and looking like an angel! No, no; he didn't

know what he wrote, Master John. He was in drink when he did it.'

John listened to this babble with attention. The housekeeper was the type of many of her class, and perhaps he was curious to note the effect of Richard's sudden disappearance upon her. If she did not believe he had really gone, others would not do so; and in that case the letter which he had composed with such labour would, for the present, have been written in vain.

'You're trembling, Master John, and you look sadly scared, as well you may; but take you comfort; your brother will come back again. It ain't in nature he should leave his home for good with nothing but the clothes he stood in. He was ill to guide at times; but in an hour like this, one only thinks how sad it would be to miss his handsome face for

ever. There, sit ye down on his bed—well, on the chair, if you like it better—and think—think, for they all say you have such a sharp wit—how we are to get the poor lad back again.’

John was indeed deadly pale, and trembled even more than his aged companion. The resolution which he had shown the previous night seemed to have quite forsaken him; he sat in his brother’s room with his head resting on his hand, quite silent, notwithstanding Mrs. Mor-den’s impatient queries.

‘Can you think of nothing, nothing, Master John, to get him back? Let me send at all events for the crier. Or shall we put “Come back” in the newspaper, as many does, that have been so bereaved, “and all shall be forgotten and forgiven?” You did quarrel a bit, I know: you quarrelled a bit last night belike——’ John

looked up quickly with a flushed, inquiring face. 'Well, I meant no offence: it was not your fault, I know, if you did.'

'We had no quarrel, woman.'

'That's true enough, because it takes two to make one, and you were ever patient with him; that I will say. But perhaps you spoke to him sharply about the drink. Did you?'

'No; he came in about two o'clock in the morning, and we talked of business matters; then I left him, and afterwards I heard the front door close.'

'Ah, then, he will come back again. Let us wait awhile. But when he does, oh, do ye, Master John, keep him off the drink! It's the cellar as will be his grave, else. Ah, well, you may frown, for you know it even better than I! Look ye here, sir: I shall go to Mr. Thorne's, and find out whether Miss Maggie has any

news of him? Or shall I send the brick-layer yonder—he's come to mend the tool-house wall—round to Mr. Lynch?'

'No, no; not yet: it will be better to wait.'

'I daresay you're right, sir; since, when Master Richard comes back, it would annoy him to find such a fuss made. But, oh, if he does come, save him, save him from himself! You are master here, they tell me, more than he is, if you had your rights. The strong drink that is left is yours. It killed my own father—rest his soul—and it is killing *him*. The cards is nothing to it, for it steals health and wealth away alike.'

John started to his feet with sudden eagerness.

'You are right, dame!' said he eagerly.
'I have been weak and foolish, where I

ought to have been strong. There shall be no more card-playing nor wine-drinking in this house. Come downstairs with me.' When they got into the parlour, he opened drawers and cupboards, and threw every pack of cards that he could find in a heap upon the floor. 'Now, put these devil's books into the fire,' cried he.

'What! the new ones?' exclaimed the old housekeeper. 'Why not send them back to the makers?'

'To ruin others as they ruined him? No; burn them all, I say!' When the fire was yet leaping and roaring over its painted prey, he bade her fetch the brick-layer.

'What! are you going to send for Mr. Lynch, then, after all? Won't that make Master Richard wild, sir, though, to be sure, not wilder than this;' and she

looked at the glowing remnants on the hearth, in extreme dismay.

‘Do as I bid you!’ cried John, stamping his foot. He was no longer cast down and nervous; and yet, in his vehemence and haste, he was as different from himself as he had been before. When the man left his work, and came into the house—‘Bring bricks and mortar,’ cried John, ‘and brick up that cellar door.’ He spoke so loud that for once Mrs. Morden caught the sense of an observation not addressed to herself.

‘But you will take out the wine first, surely, Master John?’ remonstrated she.

‘To ruin others as it ruined him?’ cried John again. ‘No; brick it up, I say!’

It seemed to Mrs. Morden that she had got a new master altogether; quite a grand Turk of a man. She admired his

edicts, and indeed had herself suggested them, and yet she feared for the scene that was likely to take place when the prodigal should return. This one had always been so patient and submissive, that the other was sure to resent these high-handed acts, though only intended for his good. Nevertheless, it was evident that John was in earnest, and meant to stick by what he had done. Perhaps the old housekeeper's reiterated assurances that Richard would return, made him half believe that he would do so, and this awakened his ire. If he did come back, the great 'Who-shall-be-master?' question would, without doubt, have to be tried on a very narrow basis. There were no longer to be two kings in Brentford.

John sat down as usual to breakfast, but not to eat. His rasher of bacon, and even the toast in the rack, remained

untasted; but he swallowed the tea as Richard was wont to do on the morning after a debauch; yet sometimes on its way to his mouth he would poise the cup in the air, and listen. Now it was the bricklayer come with more bricks to complete his task; now it was the postman; now one of those begging folk who, since old Matthew's time, ventured occasionally into the grounds of Rosebank, to take their chance of a curse or a shilling from its reckless tenant: but it was never Richard. Presently, the country lass who helped Mrs. Morden came to take away the breakfast things; John had generally left the house by that time, but this morning he showed no signs of departure.

‘What are you bringing in these things for?’ She had brought another breakfast service with her.

‘For Mr. Richard, sir.’

‘To be sure ; I had forgotten,’ said he. His brother did not usually rise till noon, or even later, but all was wont to be prepared for him thus early.

‘Mrs. Morden said I had better lay it, in case, sir.’ She meant in case of Mr. Richard’s return ; she had learned about his departure, of course, from Mrs. Morden. Here, too, it seemed that John was curious to have the opinion of others respecting his brother’s disappearance, for he began to talk to this girl on the subject. This was the more strange, as he had never said to her three words, perhaps, before : he was shy of addressing young women, even though they were his own servant-girls ; while his brother was very affable, and chucked them under their chins.

‘Did you hear Mr. Richard leave the house last night ?’

‘No, sir ; but I heard him come in.’

There was a little pause, during which John slowly wound up his watch, which he had apparently forgotten to do on the previous night : a very rare omission on his part. It seemed as though nothing was to come to pass as usual with him that morning.

‘And what time might that have been, Lucy?’

‘It struck two, sir, a few minutes after I heard his latch-key in the door.’

‘You look after Mr. Richard’s room, do you not? Well, have you ever known him to be out all night—the bed not slept in, I mean, as has happened now?’

‘Never, sir. I—I——’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing, sir, nothing ; only I do fear as he has come to some mischief. He had always a kind word for a poor girl ;’ and

she suddenly burst into tears. It was nothing more than an emotional outburst in one wholly unaccustomed to conceal her feelings, but it seemed to disconcert John excessively. He sighed heavily, and taking up a book affected to be occupied with its contents till the girl's task was done, and she had left the room. Perhaps he felt it hard, when he was trying to steel his heart against his brother, that such unearned sympathy should be bestowed upon scapegrace Richard. Presently, he went into the little hall, and took down his greatcoat.

‘Are you going out, Master John?’ inquired the old housekeeper timidly. ‘If Master Richard should return home in the meantime, what *shall* we do?’ The last clicks of the trowel could be heard from where they stood, coming from the cellar-door.

‘If any explanation of my conduct is required, I shall give it myself,’ was the stern reply.

‘And where would you be, sir?’

‘Where would I be? Why, at the office, of course! Where should I be?’

‘Well, I thought—and no offence, sir, but I think so still—that you should be taking that letter to Mitchell Street’ (the street where the Thornes lived). John had got his greatcoat half-way on, and now it seemed he could get it no farther. He turned quite white, and sank down on the lobby-chair, with one arm in its sleeve and one out. ‘Lord bless ye, sir, don’t take on so. It’s a heart-breaking errand, no doubt, but somebody must tell her the news, and who so fit as you, being his only brother.’

John groaned. ‘You are quite right, dame,’ answered he humbly. ‘I will go at once.’

He rose and put on his coat, drew himself up like a soldier on parade, and with the face of one who had volunteered for a forlorn-hope, grave, stern, and resolute, went out upon his errand.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT THE THORNES THOUGHT OF IT.

JOHN'S friends in Mitchell Street were early risers, like himself, and when he arrived there they had already breakfasted. Maggie was below-stairs, making the housekeeping arrangements for the day, but he found the engraver hard at work in the sitting-room.

‘Ah, John, I am right glad to see you; you are quite a stranger here!’ was his cordial greeting. ‘But what has happened?’ He had taken his microscope from the eye which it obscured, and now regarded his visitor attentively.

‘I am afraid that it is not good news which has brought you.’

‘No ; it is bad news.’

‘About Richard, I suppose?’ said the old man drily.

‘What! have you heard, then, Mr. Thorne?’

‘I have heard nothing ; but nothing will surprise me.’ The old man got up and carefully closed the door. ‘Let us spare her if we can. What is it?’

John put into his hand his brother’s letter without a word.

‘This is all a blind,’ observed the engraver quietly, when he had read it. ‘It is too good news to be true. Richard will never leave Hilton.’

‘You really think that?’

‘I am sure of that ; that is, until he has got every shilling out of you that is to be got, broken my daughter’s heart,

and made an old man of me before my time. No, no; there is no such good luck in store for any of us three, you may be sure.'

'But why should he have written that letter?'

'I am not at the back of Richard's motives, thank Heaven!' answered the engraver bitterly. 'But he has probably some bad end in view. *I shall be far from here when you get this*, he says: that is a melodramatic touch which he has heard at the theatre. He is probably no farther, at this moment, than we are from the slums.'

'Don't talk like that, Thorne; I can't bear it. Suppose he should be—have made away with himself, for instance? Mind, I don't say it is probable, but I believe it possible.'

'Then you will believe anything.'

However, since you think it worth while—though, for my part, I expect he is at home by this time—let us discuss the matter. Had he money in his pocket?’

John hesitated a moment, then answered: ‘Yes: he had a hundred pounds. I gave him a cheque on our London bank for that amount last night.’

‘Then, if that cheque is not changed within twenty-four hours, I will believe anything you please. A man like Richard Milbank does not try the other world while he has money to spend in this one.’

‘You are very hard upon Richard.’

‘Sir, I have an only daughter,’ was the cold reply. ‘However, let that pass. If you wish to have my advice, without any comments, you shall have it. When did you see your brother last?’

‘About three o’clock this morning. I waited up for him to remonstrate upon certain matters: his reckless expenditure, and the fatal effect it is having upon the business. We had no quarrel; but I spoke out. The time had come for it.’

‘So I should think,’ was the quiet rejoinder. ‘Well, he was offended, doubtless—though not so much so as to prevent him taking your money; and now he intends to play on your feelings by a disappearance—until he wants help again. He took everything with him he could lay his hands upon, I suppose?’

‘He took nothing—nothing but the clothes he stood up in.’

‘Indeed!’ The engraver looked less cynical and more serious.

John watched him with grave attention: if the opinions of Mrs. Morden and her ‘help’ had had an interest for him, it

was no wonder he was curious to hear Herbert Thorne's view of matters.

‘And you say you had no tiff, John; he did not fling himself out of the house in a rage?’

‘Certainly not. He left it a few minutes after we parted for the night; and I found this note awaiting me at breakfast.’

‘*What* note?’

It was Maggie's voice distinct, authoritative, clear, as she was wont to speak to all but her lover. Her gentle hand had opened the door, her soft step had entered the room, without disturbing the two men: the open letter was on the table, and her quick eye was already fixed upon it.

‘That is Richard's hand!’ cried she.

‘Yes, Maggie. You must not be frightened,’ began her father; but she

had already seized the note, and made herself acquainted with its contents.

‘What does it mean?’ asked she, looking nervously from one to the other. ‘Richard gone away, without a word, without a line to me! I don’t believe it!’

‘Just what *I* said,’ observed the engraver dryly.

‘The handwriting is his, but not the words,’ continued she. ‘There is some trickery in this.’

‘Nothing more likely,’ was the engraver’s comment; ‘but you don’t suspect our friend here of tricking you, I suppose, Maggie?’

‘Indeed not,’ answered she, holding out her hand, with a faint smile. ‘Forgive me, John. I am sure that this has distressed you to the core. If anything should go amiss with Richard, there is one man at least whom it would pain, I know—his brother.’

It pained him so—or so it seemed, even to think of such mischance—that John could find no words to answer her. He stood stock-still, where he had risen, her hand held out to him in vain, though his eyes devoured her.

‘Good heavens!’ cried she, looking at him anxiously, ‘do you really think that this was written in earnest? That Richard meant—that——’ She gasped for breath; then hurried frantically on: ‘You knew him, loved him; blameless yourself, were tender to his faults. Tell me the truth, John; you are concealing something. *I* can bear the worst; and he—my father yonder’—this with a crooked smile that became her sadly—‘would welcome it. Is Richard dead?’ She had suddenly fallen on her knees at the young man’s feet, her face whiter than milk, her long black hair shaken

loose about her shoulders. 'Is he dead, is he dead?' sobbed she.

John shook his head; his pale lips parted twice, but no sound came. To see her appealing to him as to one she trusted, confident of his help and truth, yet all for another's sake, overpowered him quite:

'How can he be dead, lass,' observed the engraver kindly, 'when he tells us in his own hand that he is gone away?'

'It is to *you* I speak, John: answer me, for you know the truth!'

'I only know what is there, Maggie,' returned John slowly, and pointing to the letter. 'If you ask what is become of Richard, I cannot tell you; if you ask my opinion as to whether he has really gone away—I think he has.'

'There were reasons, you see, my girl,' put in the engraver, more anxious now to comfort Maggie than to establish his own

theory, 'why Richard should have left the town. His affairs were in evil plight; there is little doubt that he owes money; and though John here has done his best——'

'He has *not* left the town,' interrupted Maggie excitedly; 'he would never go without taking leave of me; I am sure of it. I will stake my life upon it!'

'It is like enough you are right, lass. Richard may have returned home by this time, who knows? John and I will go back now and see.'

'And I will go with you,' said Maggie resolutely.

'Not to Rosebank,' exclaimed John suddenly, the remembrance, doubtless, of his high-handed acts that morning flashing upon him. If she should hear there of the card-burning, or of the cellar-door being bricked up, would she not accuse

him of harshness towards her lost Richard?

‘Yes, John, to Rosebank,’ answered she calmly. ‘Why not? If he is there, that is my place; if he has gone elsewhere, I will follow him.’ She moved towards the door, then stopped, and turned upon them. ‘Don’t imagine that I will ever give him up. If this is a trick upon me, it will not serve.’

‘A trick!’ groaned John. But she had already left the room. ‘Does she think I could stab her in joke?’

‘No, no; she spoke to me, not to you at all,’ said Thorne bitterly. ‘She thinks that since I have tried fair means in vain to persuade her to break with Richard, that I am now trying foul. It seems strange to you, no doubt, but then you have not a daughter who clung to you for two-and-twenty years, and cast

you off in a moment for a—— What ! ready already, lass ? Let us go, then.'

Maggie had been about half a minute in fleeing upstairs and back again, and had contrived to put bonnet and shawl on on the return journey. When love demands it, a woman can be quick, even over her toilet.

The three went out together, the father and daughter arm-in-arm, and John taking his place on the side remote from Maggie. He was never forward to be near her. They had not gone far, when Thorne whispered in his ear : ' There goes a man, who, if he would, could tell us as well as any where your brother is.'

John, being in deep thought, looked up with a quick start, almost of alarm. ' What man ? '

' Dennis Blake. See ! he has caught sight of us, and wishes to avoid a meet-

ing. For my part, I don't like to be seen speaking to such a fellow, else he is very likely to know something.'

Maggie's quick ear, sharpened by anxiety, overheard this. 'If you are ashamed to speak with anybody about Richard, I am not,' said she, withdrawing her hand from her father's arm. But another hand was laid upon her wrist, as she was about to hurry after Blake's retreating figure.

'No, Maggie,' said John firmly; 'you shall not speak to that man, neither now nor ever; *I* will do it.' And off he started with rapid strides.

Since, without running, it was clear that his pursuer could not be evaded, Blake slackened his pace, and suffered John to come up with him. His face, which the latter, of course, since he was behind him, could not see, was a study of

the baser emotions—dislike, apprehension, and duplicity. Lavater would have said : ‘ That man is a scoundrel, but he possesses a soul, for he has a secret on it.’

His shifty eyes seemed to grow smaller as John came up with him, or perhaps it was that his frowning brow hid them more and more.

‘ Ha ! is that you, Mr. Milbank ? Good-day to you ; ’ and he smiled as a dog does, showing his teeth.

‘ Good-day. I have something to say to you, Mr. Blake. An unpleasant affair has happened : my brother Richard is missing.’

‘ Missing ? ’ His look of surprise was perfect, if it was not genuine : Dennis Blake had another talent in him besides that of playing short whist. He was an actor spoiled.

‘ Yes ; he left home about two o’clock

this morning, *with the intention of calling upon you.*'

Here both men's faces were well worth looking at: his who put the query was searching, resolute, menacing, and even desperate—its colour a dead white. The expression of the other was variable: flying clouds of doubt obscured it; its hue changed from red to white, from white to red, as quickly as the colours in a kaleidoscope. 'I have not seen your brother since the day before yesterday—not since I saw *you*,' said he at last.

John Milbank drew a long, deep breath; the relief of finding that Richard had not discovered that the thousand-pound bill had been already honoured was doubtless intense.

'And you never heard him express any intention of leaving home?' This in the tone with which a counsel puts his

last question—always a comparatively unimportant one—to a witness who has done his cause good service.

‘Well, I can’t say that,’ was the unexpected reply. ‘I have heard him say he was sick and tired of Hilton, but that, of course, he was bound by circumstances to remain here.’

‘Then, if he had money in his pocket, and was no longer bound, you think it not unlikely my brother might have taken such a step?’

John spoke with great calmness—not carelessly, but with all his usual deliberation; yet there was an eagerness in his eyes which he could not quench.

‘Such a step as to leave Hilton?’ answered Blake quietly. ‘I should think nothing was more probable. I don’t say, however, but that he may turn up again pretty soon, you know. Let us hope he may.’

‘Thank you.’

It was with quite a friendly nod that John returned to his companions, for in truth the person who had given him most comfort that morning—and never had he needed it more—had been Mr. Dennis Blake.

‘Well, man, what news?’ cried Thorne, who by this time was but a few paces distant.

‘No news: Blake has not seen Richard since yesterday.’

‘John,’ said Maggie solemnly, ‘I watched that man’s face while he was talking to you, and I am sure he was not speaking truth.’

‘It is possible,’ returned John quietly. ‘Time will show.’

CHAPTER XIII.

DISENCHANTMENT.

RICHARD MILBANK did not return to Rosebank either that day or the next, and by that time all Hilton knew it. His disappearance, though by no means mysterious, since he had announced his intention to depart, was a much debated topic. At the *Sans Souci*, among the older members, there was a good deal of lifting the eyebrows and shaking of heads: 'There was something more behind, you might depend upon it, which would not be long in coming out.' The less prudent prophets even entreated their friends, in

whispers, to mark their words : ‘ It would be presently discovered that John Milbank was “ let in ” for a heap of money ’ through his scapegrace brother. The younger men were (as they imagined) more charitable ; it was their openly expressed opinion that Dick had been signalled elsewhere by the flutter of a petticoat, and that they would see him back again in ten days, or a fortnight at farthest. He was impressionable, but his fervour was apt to cool within a very limited time. In the meanwhile, he was much missed, and genuinely regretted, in the card-room, notwithstanding that he had left no debts behind him. His handsome face had been pleasant to look upon, his reckless talk had had a genial glow about it, though but too often from forbidden fires. Some even held him as witty as old Roberts, though he had not

that dry manner with him which makes a little joke go such a long way. It was agreed on all hands that Dennis Blake knew more about Milbank's whereabouts than he chose to tell, and he was cross-examined accordingly; and since he was foolish enough to take this in ill part, it was persisted in.

'Is it true, Denny, that you have quite ruined him, and given him back a little money, to take him beyond seas—as they say old Crockford used to do for *his* victims?'

'No, no,' said another; 'Blake would never do that. His favourite goose having laid its last golden egg, he has killed him, and sold the body.'

Whereupon, the economist referred to would scowl and mutter, and in his excessive irritation even play a wrong card. This he could ill afford to do, for,

now that Dick was gone, he got very little plunder, but, on the contrary, like the ringed pelican, had daily to disgorge to others the prey that he had laboriously collected for his own benefit.

Outside the club, Richard was missed also, in many quarters. Tradesmen of all sorts—tailors, bootmakers, horse-dealers—were making the most anxious inquiries about him. A jeweller wrote to Mr. Thorne to inform him that a golden cross set with turquoises, that his daughter was wearing, and which had come out of his establishment, had not been paid for. To have to return a love gift under these circumstances was ‘rubbing the gilt off’ with a vengeance, but Maggie complied with the suggestion without a murmur. It was thought a hard thing by the jeweller that John Milbank did not offer to pay for it, which

Thorne was by no means in a position to do.

As time went on, and still no news came of the missing man, public opinion set in against his brother upon his account—that he did not pay Richard's debts; though, as a matter of fact, he had not the money. His business, for the present, was crippled, and indeed was going on on credit, though there was little doubt of its eventual recovery.

Thorne did not hesitate to tell his daughter of all this; but he might have spared his breath: while her Richard was absent, and his fate unknown, all talk to his disparagement was wasted. She did not believe that he had gone away from her of his own free will, but feared for his personal safety; and while such an anxiety was on her mind, what mattered tradesmen's bills!

At last a day arrived which was destined to give her father a tremendous advantage.

‘Maggie,’ said he one morning, as they were at their work together, ‘what would make you believe that Richard had given you up?’

She was so pale now that she could scarcely grow paler; but instead of pursuing her occupation, as it was her wont to do when the engraver pressed this theme, she desisted from it at once; her trembling fingers had refused their office.

‘You have some news, father; what is it?’

‘That cheque has been paid into the London bank.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said she faintly. She did understand, poor soul, being well enough acquainted with such matters.

‘Why, the hundred pounds that John gave to his brother on the night of his departure. It was an open cheque, but payable to order; and it has just come in with Richard’s signature on the back of it. A man must be alive, you know, to sign a cheque. It is plain, therefore, that Richard is alive.’

‘Thank God!’ murmured Maggie humbly; but it was not a fervent ejaculation; the alternative, indeed, was not in her case to be fervently welcomed.

‘It was very stupid of John,’ continued the engraver, ‘not to stop the cheque; but I suppose he was afraid of offending his brother. He has already telegraphed, it seems; and the reply from the bank is that it was presented by a stranger; so there is no clue. Only the fact is now certain that

Richard is alive, and, for reasons of his own—and I have no doubt very good ones—has no wish to have any communication with you.’

There was a long pause, then Maggie said: ‘Can I see the cheque?’

‘It is here, my child; I asked John to send it for your own satisfaction.’

Her satisfaction! Does the ship-captain use that phrase when he writes to tell some widowed mother that her only lad has perished in the pitiless sea? If Richard had really signed that cheque, he was not dead, indeed, but it was almost certain proof that he had deserted her. She took it from her father, and with practised and tearless eye examined the endorsement. It was her lover’s—or what once had been her lover’s—hand: no forger could have ever deceived her *there*.

‘Are you convinced at last, my poor lassie?’ inquired the engraver tenderly.

‘That Richard signed this cheque? Yes, father.’

‘And does not the other thing follow, that he has given you up? Or will nothing ever make you believe that?’

‘Nothing; unless I hear it from his own lips.’ She rose, and walked slowly to the door; then dragged herself upstairs to her own room; and having shut herself in, dropped into a chair, and burst into a passion of tears.

‘O Richard, Richard, you are breaking a heart that only beats for you!’

She came down an hour afterwards and resumed her work as though nothing had happened: her eyes, her ears, were quick as ever, but all that they took in shaped itself with reference to her lost lover; the ‘terminable’ ink, in experiments with

which her father chanced to be engaged that morning, reminded her of Richard's vows—so fixed and stable to all seeming, and yet so unstable and fleeting; nay, the parallel was even more complete, for in neither case was there any fading away, but, in a moment, all was blank on heart and paper. The very wintry wind that huddled the snow against the window-pane seemed to breathe cold farewells, not from the grave, but worse, from lips estranged!

Herbert Thorne knew nothing of such thoughts. He had forgotten, or perhaps had never known, what grief women are capable of concealing; what mortal wounds they will hide from kith and kin, rather than confess their pain, when a once-loved hand has inflicted them. When Maggie said that she would never credit that Richard had

forsaken her till he told her so himself, her father had believed her.

If this man should die, then, she would be a mourner for him through all her youthful days ; and if he lived, and should return to claim her promise, she would be a mourner still—for her own sake. Beneath the engraver's methodical manner and outspoken ways, there lay a heart, limited, indeed, in the sphere of its affections, but tender as a girl's towards all it did love, and that all was Maggie. He had borne misfortune, disappointment in his most cherished hopes, and bitter humiliations in his calling, without a murmur ; but they had set their mark upon his being : he felt old age creeping on apace, and something worse than old age ; he had had warnings, unrevealed to Maggie, but which a doctor had trans-

lated for him, that a day might come, even before the appointed Fatal One, when his deft fingers should ply no more their busy work ; when blessed Toil should no more offer its cup of Lethe ; when he should be no longer the bread-winner, but only the bread-eater. It had been his one desire to see his daughter placed on some safe coign of 'vantage—the wife of some well-to-do and honest man, so that the wave of Want should never reach her, and chill her with its spray, when he himself should be powerless to avert it. And now this modest hope lay shattered within him. Maggie was thoroughly resolved to sacrifice herself to an idol, with front of brass and feet of clay—to throw herself away upon a selfish reprobate. He had felt very bitter about it, as well as sad, but the bitterness was over now, and

the sadness had turned to blank despair. If he had told her all this, she would perhaps have flung her arms about him, and confessed her error. But he was reticent by habit, and besides, too worn and broken in spirit to risk a new repulse. Silence may be golden, but how many a life has been worse than lost when one word of nature's promptings would have saved it !

It was Maggie's custom every afternoon to repair to Rosebank, generally in her father's company, about the time when John returned home from business, to inquire if there were any news of Richard ; and, at the usual hour, she rose, and put on her shawl and bonnet.

' Wcn't you go with me, father ? I am sure you have been working long enough : you look tired and pale. It has ceased snowing, and the fresh air will do you good.'

‘Not to-day, Maggie.’

His words were always few and decisive, but if her thoughts had not been elsewhere — hoping against hope that John might have something comforting to tell her—she would have noticed that his tone was very tremulous. When she left the house, he went to the window, and followed her with his eyes to the corner of the street; then sighing, resumed his seat, but not his toil. He sat him down to think—but to think was to be full of sorrows and leaden-eyed despairs. We lavish our pity, both in life and books, upon the disappointments of youth and the unhappiness of lovers; but we ought to reserve it rather for those who, without the strength of youth to support them, have lost not only happiness, but hope itself.

Maggie was a rapid walker, and when

she had cleared the town, she saw before her on the road a woman going in the same direction: her steps were slow because of some burden that she carried, and she seemed to progress with difficulty. Where could she be going, thought Maggie, so late in the dull, dark afternoon, and when the laden clouds were menacing more snow so unmistakably? At each of the scattered villas on the way, she expected to see her stop, and it was with genuine compassion that she observed her pass by the last, save Rosebank itself, whereby she knew she must be bound on a long journey. By this time she had overtaken her, and perceived that she was about her own age, and very pretty, but painfully delicate, and evidently of frail and feeble frame. Her breast was the cradle of a little babe, whose peevish cries she was vainly endeavouring to soothe.

‘I hope you are not going far this bitter evening?’ said Maggie kindly.

‘I am not going far,’ echoed the girl sullenly, and huddling her cloak about her, as though with some vague intention of concealing her living burden.

The movement was not lost upon Maggie, who hurried on, and presently reached Rosebank. As she turned to enter the gate, she looked back, and saw that the girl had stopped also. Perhaps she had meant to beg at the cottage, and would now be deterred from doing so by seeing her enter? Maggie glanced at the threatening sky, and her heart smote her for the evanescence of her pity for this poor creature and her innocent child; and, instead of ringing the bell, she walked hastily back, and addressed her.

‘Did you want anything, my good girl?’ said she. ‘I am known at yonder

house, and can procure you there at least a meal, if you stand in need of it.'

'I am not hungry, thank you,' was the cold reply.

'But see! it has already begun to snow again; will you not step in for shelter till the storm is over?'

'I am used to bad weather—and worse!' answered the girl, with a trembling of the lips that was meant for a cynical smile.

'But your child?' urged Maggie tenderly.

The girl burst into tears. 'Yes; my child has a right to shelter in that house,' answered she with vehemence; 'and I am going there to claim it.'

'Of whom?' inquired Maggie faintly.

'Of its father. You say you are known there. Can you tell me, then, whether Mr. Milbank has returned.

‘Mr. Milbank!’ Maggie’s heart felt like a stone; her limbs trembled beneath her. ‘Which Mr. Milbank?’

‘Are there two?’ answered the girl simply. ‘I only know of one. I have not seen him for weeks, nay, months; and I have been ill and weak, and dared not write, and now they tell me he has gone away, no one knows whither.’

‘Do you mean Richard Milbank?’

‘Oh yes. Who else? You are known at Rosebank, you say, and must know him.’

‘Yes; I know him,’ answered Maggie gravely.

It had taken her years to do so, but the recognition had come at last: he stood before her a faithless breaker of women’s hearts.

‘Have I done mischief?’ cried the girl in affrighted tones. ‘Are you his

sister, that you look so pained and angry ? ’

‘ No ; I am nothing to him, nor he to me. ’

‘ But you can tell me if it is true that he has left us—his babe, the very image of himself—look you ! ’ She drew her cloak aside, that Maggie might look upon the child ; and she did so, but with such a hard and searching gaze, that the girl shrunk back from her, exclaiming, ‘ You would not hurt him ? ’

‘ God forbid ! ’ said Maggie hoarsely.

‘ Ah, you are kind, and would not tread us underfoot, as some do. I am a sinful girl ; but then I loved him so, and he loved *me*, or else he is perjured. ’ Then, with haggard face and eager eyes, she added, ‘ Is he really gone ? Can he have deserted us for ever, think you ? ’

‘ It is possible, ’ answered Maggie slowly.

‘ He has deserted others. ’

‘Nay; but not like me and this one. He was his father, and he should have been *my* husband; a score of times he vowed to marry me. I would not come here begging to his door, to shame him thus, but for his own child’s sake; for if the mother starve, the babe must die.’

‘You shall not starve,’ said Maggie.

‘Will his people, yonder, help us, think you?’

‘I don’t know. You must not go there: come back with me, and show me where you live.’

‘It is a very poor place,’ hesitated the other; ‘they have turned us out of the rooms he took for me.’

‘No matter how poor it be, let me see it.’ And yielding to her stronger will, the sobbing girl turned back towards the town.

Within an hour of leaving her father’s

house, Maggie stood once more before its door; but in that time a revolution had taken place within her mind that years of ordinary events could not have effected. It was as if to the wound of which she had languished the actual cautery had been suddenly applied, and though still suffering tortures, she felt in a manner cured. To think that all the while Richard had been paying his vows to her, and protesting his fidelity, he had been promising marriage to another, was a reflection that turned her wholesome blood to gall. The very remembrance of his caresses was hateful to her, now that she knew that they had been lavished elsewhere. Ignorant of the world, though so sagacious in more than one of its useful callings, his infidelity appeared to her something monstrous and abnormal. Had her position in life been a more lowly one,

or if it had been higher, or if her bringing-up, even in her own condition, had been less exceptional, she would have been spared the shock of this revelation, and also, perhaps, would have missed its lesson ; but her knowledge of life was as inferior to that of most girls of her own age as her intelligence was superior. How different she was from them may be best gathered from the fact that, as soon as the sudden passion-flush had passed, and reason had time to assert itself within her, she forgave her unconscious rival, or rather confessed to herself that she had nothing to forgive. Her first impulse had been to get the girl away from Rosebank, in order to save herself from a public mortification ; but her honest heart had since been moved towards her with genuine pity. If she herself had been deceived by Richard—

against whom every voice was warning her—was this poor girl to be blamed for having become his victim? Nay, if her tale was true, might not Richard, had it not been for her own sake—she would not say ‘for the love of her,’ for she now ignored it—have redressed her wrong, and married her, so that in a manner was not she herself to blame for this poor girl’s desertion? Henceforth, at all events, she would do her best to serve her and her innocent child. In good actions, it has been said, the most wretched of mankind can find some comfort; our own cup of bitterness seems not so bitter when we strive to make that of others more palatable. Moreover, terrible as was this revelation to herself, the effects of it, she could not but reflect, would be welcome to her father, to whose loving appeals she had hitherto refused to listen; she would

henceforward make up for her undutifulness by obedience to his every wish; indeed, for the future, what wishes could she ever entertain not in accordance with his own! Side by side they would work together, undissociated by any secret thought: she would give herself heart and soul to him, sympathize with his aims, second them all she could, and if they should be successful, strive to find some happiness in his triumph.

Reader, has it not sometimes happened to you, when you have had occasion to resolve particularly upon a course of conduct, when your plans are laid, and the circumstances for which they are prepared lie, as it seems, plainly before you—the same as they did yesterday, and the day before, without a hint of a change—that all this forethought has gone for nothing, or only for what thought is worth which

can never be put in practice? Does it not seem, I say, as though Fate were jealous of feeble man's proposals, and resolute to flout them? While Maggie has her hand upon the door of home, where all that happens is known to her so well, and goes on with such methodical iteration, an empty carriage drives swiftly up to it, and stops. 'Is this Mr. Thorne's house, please, Miss?' asks the coachman.

'Yes,' says she, surprised, but not alarmed; why should she be? 'Have you any message for him?'

'No, Miss; but I have got my orders to wait here for my master, Dr. Naylor, who has been summoned to see him.'

'Summoned to see him! What about?' cried Maggie, ringing nervously at the bell.

'Well, I don't rightly know, Miss; but the man from the chemist's shop came

running down to us, ten minutes ago, to say as Mr. Thorne in Mitchell Street was took with a stroke. He told our cook it was summut of paralysis.'

CHAPTER XIV.

STRUCK DOWN.

WE hear much of the contrasts between rich and poor, and, Heaven knows, they are sharply defined and unmistakable enough; but there is another contrast not so defined, and therefore not so patent, in the social positions of our fellow-men, but which in the end is often as deplorable. This is caused by the presence or absence of what is vulgarly termed ‘an independence;’ that is, the possession of some sum of money, small or great, which is their own, and upon which they can fall back for support

in case of need. The barrister in good practice lives, during the holidays, next neighbour, at some seaside resort, to the country gentleman, who has chanced to bring his wife and children to the same place. The way of living of their two families is almost identical; you would set them down as being in the enjoyment of somewhat similar incomes; and very likely it may be so. Yet the difference between their pecuniary positions is in reality as great as, perhaps greater than, that which exists between the barrister and the humble lodging-house keeper of whose apartments he is the temporary tenant. For, if he sickens, or his practice falls away, poverty and want soon begin to press him sore; while, if he dies, ruin too often seizes upon those he has so tenderly nurtured, only to feel their fate the harder when it thus befalls. On the

other hand, should the country gentleman decease, his girls have only his personal loss to deplore; it is not the prop of the house that has been snatched away from them; in the matter of material prosperity they are as they were; while the daughters of their neighbour are no more their equals, but will have to work for scanty pay, for strangers, from youth to age. The occurrence is so common, that it excites but little remark. 'I see Brown of the Chancery Bar, or Brown the doctor, or Brown the vicar (as the case may be), is dead,' we say: 'I fear those nice girls of his will be left but badly off.'

Yet, but yesterday, Brown to all outward seeming was as prosperous as his friend Brown the county magistrate, and it would have been the height of presumption to pity his girls. Of course

folks say, 'Why did he not insure his life?' and probably to some small extent—less than he should have done, but not much less, perhaps, considering what responsibility he would have incurred in undertaking a great premium—he did insure it. At all events, that little provision does but serve to break the fall of the suddenly descending Browns.

This reflection, indeed, would sadden us more if the downfall was less sudden and complete, since as it is they all go 'under,' as it were, immediately; the ranks of society close up, and little or nothing more is heard of them, unless, indeed, one of their number happens to be fortunate enough to be taken into the family circle (yet not quite inside) of the country Browns—as their governess. This sad difference of lot does not commonly take place in the pro-

fessional class while the breadwinner is yet alive; he may fail in brain or health a little without losing his means of livelihood altogether—indeed, in the case of Brown the vicar they remain to him, even if he be bedridden, and in other cases the invalid's friends and associates 'rally round him,' and something is done for the afflicted man; but in the lower middle class—that of the mechanic who works for weekly wage—a serious illness is almost as bad as a death-blow. There is but one step from competence to penury. It is small comfort, even to a selfish man thus situated, to reflect that this misfortune is liable to occur not to him alone, but to nineteen-twentieths of those in his own calling. The little 'independence' is almost unknown among them, while the advantages of the 'benefit club' belong to a class below.

From the moment, therefore, that Herbert Thorne was stricken down by sudden sickness, the fortunes of the little household began to collapse rather than to wane. His weekly income had been better than that of many an unbeneficed clergyman, though it was largely taxed to defray the expenses of scientific experiments; and now it was absolutely *nil*. There was no incoming at all, but all was outgoing—save what Maggie, who had the duty of sick-nurse to perform, could earn with her hands. It is the consideration of cases of this kind—which are as common as the tooth-ache—which makes one smile scornfully when the man of ‘independent’ means talks about ‘hard times,’ for he can never know what they are.

Maggie was very clever and assiduous; did not waste her wits or wages, like her

father, upon impracticable theories; would have been the best helpmate and home-ruler that a diligent man could have taken to his bosom; and could have maintained *herself* at all times were health but granted to her; but the burden that was now cast upon her willing shoulders was greater than they could bear. The rent of the house, for one thing, would have swallowed up half her gains; and there were her father and the servant to feed, and the doctor to pay, and—— But the list of what has to be provided for even in the most humble household is a long one, and would weary the comfortable reader; albeit every item of it, as it flashed on poor Maggie's mind, was not merely a wearisome detail, but inflicted a pang as real and painful as the most sentimental woe ever endured by a heroine of romance.

She had found her father prostrate and powerless on his bed, unable even to shape her name, though he looked at her with an eloquence of love and sorrow that went beyond all power of words. And at the end of the terrible three months that followed, so far from being 'himself again,' of which Dr. Naylor had given her hopes, he had not yet wholly recovered the use of his limbs—the power of getting about and helping himself—while, whether that once deft and diligent right hand should ever regain its cunning at all, was more than doubtful. Most fortunately, what work Maggie could do could be done at home, and she had toiled by the sick man's bed all day without leaving him for an hour. He was not on any account to be 'worried' or made 'to think,' the doctor had said; so her talk

had been always cheerful; she had sung to him his favourite songs—which her mother had taught her when a child—as soon as he was strong enough to hear them without tears; she had read to him also, whenever he had felt inclined, making up for the hours thus idly spent by work in her own room at night; and John Milbank had called every day, and sat with the old man, especially through that time when Maggie was compelled to go out to dispose of the proceeds of her handiwork, or for health's sake for a breath of fresh air. It was a hard life for her, yet in some respects, like all lives spent in the path of duty, it had not been without benefit to herself. She had learned from it that her affection for Richard had not only been misplaced, but selfish; and though it still existed within her, it was to be from

henceforth subordinate to filial duty. Suppose she had married, and been forbidden by her husband to tend this beloved parent—would all Richard's protestations of devotion to herself, even had they been genuine, have consoled her, or acquitted her conscience for that undutiful desertion? The doctor's questions as to the cause of her father's seizure had quivered like a barbed arrow in her very heart. Did he suffer from any mental trouble? Was he grieving for a disappointment, or *had he been for any length of time in expectation of some calamity?* She answered in the negative, but something within her seemed to protest against her words. Without acknowledging to herself that she had been the cause of his misfortune, her whole soul was bent upon reparation; and in the practice of self-sacrifice, she

had found a balm for many things. Only at first, the shadow of the coming Want, of the inevitable hour in which her slender purse should not contain a coin, threw gloom upon her soul. What gloom, then, must it needs be throwing upon him who, lying upon his sick-bed with helpless hands, had little else to occupy his thoughts! Yet, since he never spoke of it, and always had a smile for her, she had begun to hope that Fate, while striking him with so pitiless a hand, had deadened her father's capabilities of pain in this respect, and that, like a child, he took all that was given to him, without concern as to the source from which it came; that Nature herself had backed the doctor's orders, that the invalid was not to be 'made to think.' It was not long, however, before she was undeceived. On the very

first day that the engraver was moved downstairs into the sitting-room, he looked about him with a surprised and troubled air.

‘Maggie, darling,’ he whispered feebly, ‘how is it that all is here as when I left it?’

‘Why not, dear father? What should not be here?’

He pointed to the costly scientific instruments which he loved as Norman William loved the tall deer. ‘These would have brought money, darling, and you must have needed it sadly. How is it you have managed without it?’

Maggie’s cheek showed a faint blush in spite of herself. ‘I borrowed a little,’ answered she; ‘we are to repay the loan as soon as you are able to work again.’

The engraver looked at his wasted right hand, still disobedient to his will.

‘That is but poor security,’ sighed he ;
‘there is but one man that I know of
who would have advanced us anything
upon it.’

‘Well, father, he has done it, so what
matters ? Dr. Naylor says you are not
to worry yourself about business affairs.’

‘It does not worry me to talk of John
Milbank ; it does me good.’

Maggie blushed deeper than ever ; his
words had a meaning for her which she
strove to ignore.

‘Tell me all about it, darling, from the
first.’

‘When you were first taken ill, father,
I could think of nothing else but that,
and the question of how we should pay
our way did not trouble me ; besides, the
doctor told me that you would soon be
well again. But presently one little bill
dropped in, and then another ; and we

began to owe for things that we had been used to settle for every week. Lucy's wages fell due, too, and it seemed right to pay them before anything; and, small as they were, they took my last shilling.'

'My poor Maggie!'

'Then the man called for the quarter's rent, and though he was civil enough, I knew it would not be so the next time; and others called who were not so civil. I had no idea how hard some folks could be.'

'But others were kind, Maggie; tell me about that.'

'John was very kind, father. He pretended that the price of goods, such as I supply, was raised in the market, and offered to dispose of them at higher prices; but I saw through that—' here her voice began to tremble a little—'and declined the aid that was but alms, however delicately bestowed.'

‘And about the loan, Maggie?’ continued the old man (for he looked old indeed now) after a long silence, during which he regarded her, while she worked on as usual, with yearning eyes. ‘How was it he came to lend this money?’

‘I think he saw that I was greatly troubled, father; and once, when I went out to pay some one who had been very importunate an instalment of his bill, I found the whole had been already settled by an unknown hand. When I taxed John with having paid it, he at first denied it, and then insisted that he was your debtor. You had lent his uncle money, he said, years ago, through which he had made his fortune, and since he had done so and made John his heir, John owed it *you*.’

‘But the money was paid, Maggie.’

‘So I told him, father; but he answered

that the obligation remained, and that, at all events, he must insist on your accepting from him a loan to the same amount as the debt originally incurred. I was very loath, but he urged what was but too true, that money must be had somehow; and if I parted with your books or instruments, they would be sold at a great sacrifice, and that, besides, you would be crippled for the want of them, when you should recover. So at last I took the money.'

'Why, that was a hundred pounds, lass! I know not how it can ever be repaid,' added he, looking at her wistfully.

'You were not to worry yourself about that, he said,' answered Maggie hastily, 'but to repay it by instalments when it suited you; and, besides, I have spent but very little of it; only, I thought it better to accept John's offer, handsome

as it was, rather than be applying to him again and again, if we should need to do so. It is so unpleasant to talk about money matters, even if one's friend is ever so kind—and, indeed, I think John was as embarrassed as myself.'

'Don't you think that was because he was dealing with you, Maggie? When he comes to mention it to me, he will have no such shyness.'

'Very likely, father,' answered she quietly; 'a man understands a man so much better than he understands a woman.'

Then Maggie worked on in silence with nimble fingers, and the old man moved slowly about the room among his favourite instruments, touching this and that in an absent and preoccupied manner.

'John tells me that nothing has been heard of his brother, Maggie,' said he at

last ; ‘you have heard nothing yourself, I conclude ; no letter, nor anything ?’

‘I have heard nothing, nor do I expect to hear,’ was her calm reply.

‘And if you did ?’ asked the engraver with significance.

‘If I did, it would make no difference, father ; I would never marry Richard now.—Don’t ask me why,’ added she with vehemence ; ‘don’t speak to me upon the subject, if you would spare me pain ; but, if it is any comfort to you to know it, Richard——’ Here something seemed to choke her speech, and she laid her hand upon her bosom as if in pain.

‘What ! you love him no longer ?’ cried the engraver with eager joy.

‘I did not say that,’ exclaimed Maggie passionately ; ‘I wish to Heaven I could ! But do not fear that I will ever be his wife.’

The old man tottered towards her, and stooping down, kissed her bowed forehead. 'The doctor need not come again to see me, darling ; your words have done me more good than all his drugs.'

If it was so, the cure was obtained at the expense of the physician: as the mesmerist gives his own vital force to eke out that of his patient, so Maggie, it seemed, had parted with heart and hope to give them to her father, for the girl had fainted at her desk.

CHAPTER XV.

CHAMPIONED.

A FEW days after the avowal from his daughter's lips, which had made the engraver very literally 'another man'—brought the light back to his eye, the flush of health to his wasted cheek, and even returning steadiness to his still wayward right hand—Mr. Linch, the lawyer, paid them a visit. Without having absolutely neglected them during their late troubles, he had not been a frequent visitor in Mitchell Street, and his arrival on that particular morning astonished them considerably, for it happened to be

the Sabbath, of which that gentleman was a very strict observer.

‘I am glad to see you up and about again, Mr. Thorne. Miss Maggie, I hope you are well?’

The difference of manner with which the new-comer delivered those two sentences was remarkable: the former was spoken in as genial a tone as the sacredness of the day permitted, the latter was cold and formal. The sensitive ear of the engraver at once detected this. He knew that the speaker thought ill of Maggie for her fidelity to Richard Milbank, and judged her with sectarian narrowness, and, though he had at one time lamented her obstinacy to this very man, he resented—now that she was obstinate no longer—any show of reproof towards her.

‘I believe Maggie is more of an invalid,

Mr. Linch, than myself,' observed he gravely: 'in tending me, she has, I fear, injured her own health, and has no more appetite than a bird.'

'There are some birds—such as cormorants,' remarked Maggie cheerfully, 'who have very good appetites, father.'

'Yes; but you don't eat like a cormorant, my darling, but more like a canary; and the consequence is, you are worn to a shadow.'

'Miss Maggie looks pale and delicate, doubtless,' said Mr. Linch dryly. 'Could I have a few minutes in private with you, Thorne?'

'In private? Well, I have no secrets from Maggie; but——'

'It is no secret, unfortunately,' interrupted the lawyer; 'but I think it would be more advisable to say what I have to say to you in your daughter's absence.'

‘Is there any news—I mean, from Rosebank?’ exclaimed Maggie suddenly. ‘If so, Mr. Linch, I can bear to hear it; nay, I *claim* to hear it.’

Mr. Linch returned her appealing look with one of extreme surprise. ‘Claim to hear it, young woman!’ returned he with irritation; ‘the law knows no such claim: it is not as if you were an accused party.—Upon my life, Thorne, I don’t know what your daughter means.’

‘You must be very dull, then,’ said the engraver tartly. ‘She wishes to know if there is any news of Richard Milbank.’

‘No, no,’ answered the lawyer hastily; ‘none at all, I assure you—none at all. It is on quite another matter that I wish to have a few words with your father.’

Maggie at once withdrew, and left the two men alone together.

‘It is the most extraordinary thing that

your daughter should have asked that question,' gasped the little lawyer: 'my head was so full of certain news from Rosebank, that I could think of nothing else. Richard Milbank had no place in my mind, because it was wholly occupied with John.'

'What about John?' asked the engraver with anxiety. 'I thought, when you rang the bell like that, it was sure to be he.'

'Well, John has got into a scrape. You would think he was the last man in the world to have done it, but he has come into—yes—collision with the police,' said Mr. Linch, bringing out this painful intelligence with a gasp of desperation.

'With the police! echoed the engraver, astounded. 'What! has John been drinking?'

'No, indeed; perhaps it would be

better for him in this case if he had. He has committed a very serious assault, without drunkenness to excuse it, upon Mr. Dennis Blake.'

'Well, he was right so far—I mean in his selection of a victim,' observed the engraver grimly. 'It was about Richard, of course; and, for my part, I have always held that that fellow Blake knows more about John's brother than he chooses to tell. He was very flush of money just at the time he disappeared—though he soon got quit of it at cards, they say—and if there was foul play anywhere——'

'It was not about Richard that the quarrel arose,' interrupted the lawyer gravely, 'or else I should not have come here to-day. It was about somebody dearer and nearer to you than he, Thorne: it was about your daughter Maggie.'

‘I have heard something of this before,’ said the engraver, with an air of extreme annoyance. ‘I know John means us well, and more than well, every way; but he should not pay attention to the idle talk of every good-for-naught, nor think it necessary to correct him for letting his tongue run. It does more harm than good to those he would stand up for.’

‘Blake said a very aggravating thing this time, however,’ replied the other, looking at the engraver very fixedly; ‘and supposing it was all lies, as I hope it was, I don’t blame John—speaking as a man, of course, not as a lawyer—for taking the matter up. But Blake was drunk, it seems; indeed, if he had not been he would not have dared to say what he said; and John has beaten him within an inch of his life. I say again, it is a serious business. The case will

have to come to-morrow before the magistrates ; and if it should turn out that Blake was only telling the truth, or what he believed to be the truth——’

‘The truth about *what?*’ inquired the engraver impatiently. ‘You don’t mean to say, I hope, that it was anything disgraceful, which might yet be true of my Maggie?’

‘Now, my dear Thorne, it is no use your putting yourself in a passion ; I have come here to get at the facts of the case, whatever they may be, for I shall have to meet them to-morrow. Mind, I assert nothing of myself ; but if what Blake said was true, Richard Milbank has left a legacy of shame and wrong behind him, such as my heart bleeds to think of, for *your* sake. There is a child in Poulter’s Alley out at wet nurse——’

‘Silence!’ exclaimed the engraver, in

sharp, shrill tones, and rising from his chair as hastily as his lame limbs would let him. 'You do not know Herbert Thorne's daughter.—Maggie!' cried he, going out upon the landing, and calling up the stairs, 'come down here, lass; thou'rt wanted.—Not a word more, Mr. Linch, I beg, until she comes.'

'It is an unnecessary ordeal,' commenced the lawyer; but the next moment the girl stood in the doorway, pale and undisturbed, with her quiet inquiry, 'What is it, father?'

'John Milbank has got into trouble through thrashing Dennis Blake, for uttering lies about *you*, Maggie. Mr. Linch has called to know whether they *are* lies, in order that he may adopt the proper line of defence. Please to answer any question he may put to you.'

'Your father has imposed a very un-

pleasant duty upon me,' observed the lawyer hesitatingly; 'it is none of my seeking, of course. I merely came here as John Milbank's legal adviser, in order to get at the facts.'

Maggie bowed like a princess, walked quickly up to her father, and, kissing him, forced him gently into a chair; for, notwithstanding his attempts at self-control, he was trembling excessively; and then stood up with her hand on his shoulders, confronting the visitor.

'Well, sir?'

'You have—ahem!—a pensioner, I believe, in Poulter's Alley,' he began—'a young woman?'

'Not now,' replied she, with quiet sadness: 'the person you speak of is dead.'

'Indeed! I saw her myself not an hour ago.'

‘You are mistaken. However, there was a poor girl there, to whom I gave assistance—as much as I could, though much less than I would fain have given.’

‘There is a child—an infant—out at nurse there: is it true that you support it?’

‘I do so.’

Maggie felt her father shiver beneath her touch, and sliding down her hand till it met with his, clasped it assuringly.

‘My daughter is always good to the poor,’ said he, ‘though we are poor ourselves.’

‘And who is the father of this child?’ inquired the lawyer, looking at his fingers, and dropping his voice to almost a whisper.

‘Must I tell that?’ asked Maggie, in the same hushed tone.

‘It will have to be told to-morrow, and if I am unacquainted with the fact,

my client will be placed at a disadvantage,' was the rejoinder.

There was a long pause; and Maggie's lips moved twice in vain before they could shape her answer: 'It is Richard Milbank.' Then she burst into tears.

'It is mere cruelty to your daughter, Thorne, to continue this investigation,' said the lawyer, himself greatly moved; 'we must make the best fight of it we can for John; that's all.'

'Maggie! darling Maggie! he does not know you as I know you; he has not your hand in his as I have, bidding me trust on through all. You must bear one question more, and answer it.—You may ask it, Linch, without fear. Nay, if you will *not*, I will.—Richard Milbank is the father of this child, you say, Maggie; now, tell us one thing more—who was its mother?'

‘It was Alice Grey of Dardham. She ought to have been Richard’s wife. May Heaven forgive him for his wrong to her! She died some weeks ago—I fear, in want—I was too late to help her; only just in time to save the child.’

‘And this can be corroborated by proof?’ exclaimed the lawyer excitedly.

‘If necessary—if absolutely necessary, to John. But oh, spare Richard!’

‘My dear Miss Maggie, we will admit nothing unless we are absolutely obliged. After what you have told me, I should think this Blake would be only too glad to compromise the affair. However, though he spoke in malice, it was probably in ignorance of the facts of the case, and he has certainly been most terribly knocked about. We shall have to pay the man a good lump sum, no doubt.—It is very hard upon our friend

John,' continued Mr. Linch, addressing himself to the engraver, 'to suffer thus in pocket for his brother, having just paid off his debts. I settled the last one for him yesterday. I never knew a man with so fine a sense of duty. Well, I go away with a light heart, Thorne, upon all accounts. Miss Margaret, I wish you good day.'

His friendly and effusive manner had quite returned. Maggie suffered him to take her hand, which most young women who had been subjected to such an injurious suspicion would probably not have done; but her nature was eminently a just one. She perceived that the circumstances of the case had afforded Mr. Linch no other alternative than to believe the child in Poulter's Alley was her own. Was it possible, thought she, with a shudder, that John

Milbank also believed it, notwithstanding that he had resented the accusation in another's mouth? What a good brother, as Mr. Linch had said, had he proved himself, and how unostentatiously had he performed his good deeds, for not a word had he dropped to them about settling Richard's debts!

The consciousness of having grudged him praise, and the sense of his late kindness to her father, in the matter of the loan—as well, perhaps, of this last action in her own behalf, though she tried to shut that out from her consideration—prompted her to speak of John as she had never done before. She said he seemed to her to be the most unselfish and unsullied of all men of their acquaintance.

The engraver smiled; her choice of adjectives was particularly agreeable to

him, since it appeared to be suggested by the contrast in the characters of the two brothers; but, taught by experience, he refrained from eulogy. John was always a good fellow, he admitted; but why was he not more popular? There must be something wrong, he feared, about one who was a favourite with such few people.

Maggie quoted from the book that she had been reading to her father before the lawyer had looked in, the observation that the friendship of the world was not to a man's credit, but altogether the other way.

'In that case,' returned the engraver, 'John should be secure of heaven, since everything he does has a bad motive ascribed to it by his fellow-creatures. The very paying-off his brother's debts will be considered but a tardy act of

justice—nay, of reparation—though, to my knowledge, the poor fellow has been sadly straitened for money to carry on his business.’

‘Of reparation! How of reparation?’ inquired Maggie.

‘Oh! they say he made money by Richard, instead, as was really the case, of having been half-ruined by him! His very disappearance, even, has been laid to John’s account.’

‘What *do* you mean, father?’

‘Nay, I don’t mean to say they think he murdered him; but the world says—or did, before I was taken ill—that he bought him out of the concern at a cheap rate, and so secured it for himself.’

‘Then the Hilton world must be a very, very wicked and slanderous one!’ said Maggie indignantly.

The engraver shrugged his shoulders.

‘I think it is the air, my dear. I have known somebody in Hilton—and not, in my judgment, a wicked person—who had at one time never a good word to say for this John Milbank, herself.’

To this, Maggie answered nothing; but after awhile, during which she gazed fixedly at the book before her, without reading a line, she observed: ‘If you knew John was straitened for money, was it not wrong, father, to let him lend us so large a sum the other day?’

‘I did not know it *was* lent, until afterwards,’ returned the engraver, smiling. ‘It was lent to *you*, you know, my dear, not to *me*.’

‘That was only, of course, because you were ill, and could not attend to such matters. Don’t you think it would be better to return him, say, half of it at once, and pay him the remainder by

instalments, as we can scrape it together?’

‘Why not give him security for the whole, Maggie?’ answered the old man sily. Then perceiving that he was not understood, he added: ‘Is it possible, my good lass, that you did not guess by what means we have won through this terrible trouble? You know, of course, that it was thanks to John; but are you so blind as not to see why John has helped us? It is my belief that he has loved you from a boy; only, because Richard was too quick for him with you, that he never spoke of it.’

‘Oh, father, father!’ cried Maggie, hiding the crimson of her cheeks in both her hands, ‘I hope not, I hope not!’

‘That’s hoping against hope, lass, for it is the case. But there is no need to take on so; *I* have quite done with

giving you advice as to marriage, and if I know John, he is not one to intrude his attentions where they are not wanted. He is too used to holding his tongue, poor fellow, to plague you in that way. While Richard was paying you attentions, John could scarcely have done you a service lest it should have been misunderstood ; but now the coast is clear, he has ventured upon a kindness. But as to speaking to you of marrying him, unless you give him some encouragement, that he will never do : such, at least, is my view of the matter, and though my limbs are lamed, I have still some use of my eyes.'

The sorrowful glance that the engraver cast on his nerveless right hand went more perhaps to Maggie's heart than all his words. 'I am very sorry, father, for your sake,' sighed she, 'that I cannot

love John Milbank. I honour and respect him above all men, and feel more grateful to him than I can express, both on your account and my own.'

'May I tell him that, Maggie?'

'Yes, father; it is but right that he should know it.'

'My darling, you are curing me fast; where honour and respect are won, love is not altogether out of reach.'

'My love is dead, father,' sighed she, 'and no miracle can ever quicken it.'

'But if John would be content with the respect and honour, lass, and take you on those terms?'

'It is not necessary to speak of that, father: when John asks me to become his wife—if he be really so ill-judged as to desire it—it will be time enough to consider that matter.'

‘Very good, Maggie; we will say no more about it,’ said her father softly. He was secretly well pleased with the measure of success that had been vouchsafed to him.

END OF VOL. I.

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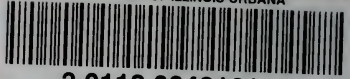
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